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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE GREEN BOX CLUE

The reappearance of the mysterious Green Box in the smithy where Carter was hiding behind the forge

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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THE GREEN BOX CLUE;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S GOOD FRIEND.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

"WHERE IS ARTHUR STETLOW?"

The well-built man, seated for the last hour in a shaded corner of the clubhouse veranda, finally pulled his chair from the secluded niche he had occupied, and became a factor in the rather entertaining conversation, to which he had been an intent auditor.

"Beg pardon, gentlemen," he declared, "do I understand you to say that there is a club mystery? A mysterious disappearance that has set the entire village to talking?"

There were four men at that end of the porch, sipping cool drinks from long glasses—men of individuality and high social stamp; club men of the more pronounced New York type. One of the party gave answer.

"Yes, we are in the throes of a rather complicated affair, Mr. Mede; a puzzle we have so far been quite unable to solve. You have not heard the details?"

"Nothing more than what I could catch from snatches of porch gossip," Mr. Mede answered. "I only ran up this morning and I've been out golfing much of the time."

A nice-appearing young fellow, well groomed and with a pair of fine blue eyes, swung his chair around until he faced Mede, and motioned to the waiter.

"Won't you have something?" he asked.

"A split of White Rock, yes, thank you."

Soon a circle of high balls and horse's-necks were sparkling and clinking around the porch table, and smoke from as many fragrant cigars drifted lazily out across the flowered paths to the right of the pretty clubhouse.

To the detective's knowledge, not a member of that comfortable gathering realized that the famous Nick Carter was in their midst; and had been since the big red touring car from New York buzzed up to the clubhouse on the hill. Resident members, there for six months on a stretch and staid old white-haired gentlemen, particular with regard to their acquaintances, acknowledged that "Mr. Mede" was a splendid fellow, and that his introductions from New York members were above reproach.

Nick Carter had a well-defined reason for wanting to hide his real identity. Once before, two days before, to be exact, the detective had started in his touring car with Danny, the object of that trip one of well-earned rest and recreation after innumerable trying city cases. Before he was even well on his way up the State, a Riverside Drive murder mystery and bond theft called him from his impromptu vacation. He took charge of it instantly and had been instrumental, in two days, in rounding up the facts of the enigma. Mr. Randolph Hicker Minton's trusted butler, Ephus, had been deliberately murdered by a one-time and finally rejected suitor to the hand of Grace Minton, the millionaire's eldest daughter. Jealousy and a gambling life had involved the young rogue in other difficulties. He had rifled his father's bank, become connected with two or three kingpins of

crime, and just managed to escape when the round-up by Nick Carter and his assistants was in progress.

Of the others, Ford, a big, bruising rascal, made a complete confession and was now awaiting trial. One "Baldy" Bradley, the real leader of these enterprises, went scot-free, temporarily, because of a most astonishing state of affairs. Carter and his assistants had captured Bradley, when he was mysteriously liberated by a young fellow who later proved to be the man's son. They were as unlike as any two characters could be. Charlie Bradley was engaged to marry Grace Minton, and when Nick Carter understood the facts, believing in young Bradley's integrity and finding that he had even recovered the documents stolen by his father, with the avowed intention of returning them to their owner, he did not implicate Charles, and the affair of the missing bonds was dropped forthwith. The fact remained, however, that Bradley, Senior, was at large, a criminal of very low and aggressive instincts.

The case thus disposed of, Nick's home friends, including Chickering Carter, Patsy and phlegmatic Joseph, all rallied in insisting that Nick try for that delayed vacation once more. He was more than willing to run up to the Elkhorn Country Club, on the Hudson, however, and, armed with proper letters of introduction, he was glorying in sunshine, rest, and pure, sweet air.

To travel incognito was not his customary habit, but as "Mr. Mede" he had so far escaped such attentions as he would otherwise certainly have received. After the turn at golf, a brisk rub-down and a bath, Nick had sauntered out upon the long, comfortable veranda of the clubhouse on the knoll, in the slanting afternoon sunshine, and selected a corner apart from the chatting groups. The young man facing him, Hilton Kemp, had, during the day, shown an unusual desire to be nice to Nick; had introduced him to all the members, shown him over the grounds, and put himself out to be at once courteous and agreeable. The action on Kemp's part somewhat puzzled the detective.

"What is your local mystery? Nothing serious, I hope?" Carter inquired casually.

"One of our best-known members has absolutely disappeared," Kemp explained.

"Disappeared?"

"Yes, and in a manner that leaves us completely in the dark. I thought you surely had heard of it."

"What is the name of the missing man? I am somewhat of an amateur detective and such things interest me immensely; I should like to become acquainted with the facts, Mr. Kemp."

"Tuesday, at noon, Mr. Stetlow, Arthur B., reached the club. He came by train and rode up in a carriage, one trunk following. A majority knew Stetlow, although I confess he is a stranger to me, or was. He has been in Chicago for almost a year now and is engaged in the real estate business."

"That was what brought him down here, Kemp," another member of the party put in; "he had some deal on, I think."

"Yes," Kemp continued, "I believe that he was to buy up a large area of property across the Micklin Road from our grounds here. He was backed heavily by men of means, and was wealthy in his own right; I guess Stetlow has salted away a couple of million, eh, Lanning?"

"Easily," the slender man at the end of the table replied.

"As I say, Stetlow reached here at noon, Tuesday. He is a stout, pudgy little chap, and he doesn't like to play golf, but he promised to have a whirl at it, for the sake of lessening his avoirdupois, on Wednesday morning. He went out with four of us, Mr. Lanning, Dearborn, Kipp and myself. We went over the course about halfway, I guess, when Stetlow complained of exhaustion. He said he had not exercised for a year and the heat was too much for him."

"It was frightfully hot that morning," Lanning interpolated.

"At first we chided him for laziness, but he threw down his clubs and walked over to a tree just this side of the Micklin Road, where it turns into the Cessville Pike. 'I'll wait here until you fellows swing around back,' he called to us, mopping his brow.

"Several of us tried to get him to brave out the game, but he wouldn't, so we left him there in the shade. He was laughing as far as we could see. Two of us, when the game was finished, took a carriage to the Stone Lodge. Lanning and myself went around by way of the road for Stetlow. He was not there. We thought he had grown tired of waiting for us, so we went directly to the clubhouse. It was then about one-thirty, wasn't it, Lanning?"

"Just about," the thin fellow assented.

"Mind you, Mr. Mede, this took place Wednesday morning. Stetlow was *not* at the club nor have we found a trace of him since we saw him under that tree on the course. Searching parties have been constantly at work, night and day, but with no result."

"If you are an amateur detective, Mr. Mede," another of the party laughed, "we can provide sufficient material for you."

"But, gentlemen, you do not seem to take the matter very seriously," Nick Carter suggested.

"I do," Kemp exclaimed.

"And I think I do, too," Lanning muttered, his brow clouding; "some of the members think that Stetlow was called suddenly away on business, or was prostrated by the heat and went out of his head, wandering up to Cessville, but——"

"But," interposed the quiet Mr. Mede, "Cessville has been searched by this time, has it not?"

"We have all been up there; it is only a small village."

"And," the "amateur detective" continued, "if business had called Mr. Stetlow away, he certainly would have returned to the club for his luggage; I take it that his trunk, etc., are still here."

"They must be in his room."

"Ah, his room has not been opened, then?"

"No, we didn't open it," Kemp said.

"Why not?"

"We did not really take the matter much to heart until to-day, and this afternoon. All of us thought that Stetlow would turn up. He was a good-natured, joky sort of man, and it would have been just like him to plan a deal of this kind."

"Mr. Stetlow did have a room in the club?"

"One flight up, in this building. There are thirty or more comfortable, if small, apartments."

"That door has not been unlocked since the disappearance of Mr. Stetlow?"

"I think not."

"What about servants—the maid, perhaps?"

"That I do not know."

Nick Carter sipped his glass of sparkling water and said nothing for some moments. The circle of men were watching him with a sort of new admiration, Kemp especially.

"Mr. Stetlow arrived Tuesday, at twelve?"

"Yes," Kemp answered.

"What did he do all afternoon?"

"Sat around and talked with all of us—with his old friends."

"Did he receive any visitors that were not members of this club?"

"Not that we know."

"He slept here that night, Tuesday night?"

"Yes; went up around eleven."

"Down bright and early the next morning?"

"Oh, yes. Stetlow was a jolly soul. When he takes his shower bath you can hear him sing half around the course."

"Next came the game of golf?"

"We started out at about nine or a little later."

"Did Mr. Stetlow appear to be suffering from any peculiar ailment when you left him under the tree at, say, eleven-thirty?"

"No, oh, no; he was laughing and puffing most comically."

"No evidences of a heat prostration?"

"He was not sunstruck, if that is what you mean."

"Did he lie down under the tree?"

"Squatted there, yes."

"From how far along the course could you see him?"

"A half mile, not more."

"And you saw him, say a half hour after you left him, which would mean that he was still beneath the tree at, approximately, twelve?"

"Yes."

"You reached the club, after stopping at the tree, at one-thirty?"

"Or thereabouts."

"Yesterday?"

"Yesterday."

"What steps have you taken to find him?"

"Individual searching parties and the local police."

"They have found nothing, no clue?"

"Absolutely nothing, Mr. Mede."

Again Nick Carter was wrapped in thought, musing over his White Rock and Havana.

"Are you willing to encourage an amateur detective to the point of letting me open Mr. Stetlow's room and investigate his belongings?"

There were cries of approbation.

"We shall have to find the general key; I think it is hanging inside," Kemp exclaimed.

The party would have followed the detective upstairs, but Nick Carter asked as a special favor—even insisted—that his investigations be carried on in private. They settled back in their chairs around the table, including Kemp, who, of the crowd, displayed no displeasure.

Carter was not absent fifteen minutes. He was a trifle pale as he walked out upon the piazza, standing a few feet from them.

"Well, nothing up there, I'll bet, Mr. Mede?" Kemp said.

"On the contrary, gentlemen," Nick Carter returned gravely, "I found enough to convince me that you will never see Mr. Stetlow alive again."

They sprang from their chairs, incredulous, astonished, horrified at this ghastly statement.

"Do you mean that he is dead?" Kemp gasped.

"I mean that he has been murdered," was the calm rejoinder.

CHAPTER II.

MYSTERY BEYOND MICKLIN ROAD.

When Nick Carter opened the door of Mr. Stetlow's room, he felt, intuitively, if he ever did in his life, that he was face to face with a crime.

He may not have expected to discover the dead body of the missing club member, but he felt that some tiny clue, some fragment of material fact in that room, would help to make a solution of Stetlow's disappearance clearer.

He closed the door, looking around him.

As in the case of every department of the clubhouse, good taste, neatness and comparative luxury were shown in Stetlow's small room. The furnishings were such as gentlemen were accustomed to, walls draped and covered with pictures of the reigning sports.

The occupant of the room, before his departure from it the last time, had left things in a rather careless way. A trunk had been left open against the wall, the tray on the bed. Over the electric-light fixture a dozen or more handsome scarfs had been flung in confusion. Clean and soiled linen, underclothing, shirts, handkerchiefs and other articles were spread upon the coverlet. Stetlow had certainly unpacked his trunk, not immediately upon his arrival, but the next morning. In the lower part of the trunk there were current magazines, two light summer suits, somewhat wrinkled, and portions of a

well-kept man's wardrobe. A search through various pockets brought nothing of moment to light.

A suit case was equally unprolific of clues, but when Nick unlocked, with a certain key of his own, the last drawer of a handsome oak cabinet, to the left of the bed, he ran upon the first tangible and important bit of information. All of the drawers in the cabinet were of goodly length, and into the top ones Stetlow had thrown with careless hand a few of his shirts. Nothing, however, was in order. Then came two entirely empty drawers. The last one was locked, which was not true of the others, and the key was missing. Nick Carter had no difficulty in opening it, however.

A piece of newspaper had been spread inside and the only other object was a slightly elongated green box. It was of enameled tin, shiny and costly in workmanship, despite its cheap metal. It was possibly seven inches the longest way and five the narrow. A lock, deftly fitted into one side, was substantially constructed and offered more trouble to the detective when he set about opening it. As he threw back the lid and peered in, walking at the same time to the window for a better light, he felt a growing interest.

The dark-green enamel on the inside of the box was slightly scratched, as if something had been slid along the polished surfaces. Three business letters were inclosed, with Chicago letterheads, and dated back a month. They were distinctly commercial in tone and need not be repeated here, as they have nothing whatever to do with the case. Another folded slip was of more importance. It was one of the new thin leather post cards, and while it had not been addressed, some one had written on the back these hurried lines in ink::

"I'm not afraid of them, Jack. Some coward wrote that. When I go——"

But here the strange message ended, broken off abruptly. It was as if, in answer to the anxious letter of a friend, some one had started to write out the leather post card and had been interrupted or thought it best not to send the same. That there was a hidden threat, a thread of mystery, the ingredients of a tragedy between the lines, Nick Carter did not doubt for an instant, and he was thoroughly convinced of this when he later compared the writing on the post card with Stetlow's signature on the ninety-second page of the club register. The handwriting was identical.

Stetlow, then, had started to write that word of reassurance, but had never finished it. He must have had a very good reason, in turn, for placing it in the green box, for that box was of a character commonly employed for holding valuables.

Nick assumed, as a starting point, that threatening matter of some nature had been sent to Stetlow. Whether in Chicago—and that appeared more probable—or while at the club, he could not then determine. The threat had not worried or preyed heavily upon the real estate man. He had treated it as he appeared to treat everything—lightly. He had started to reassure a friend, "Jack," and stopped, placing the leather post card back in the box. There was no way of identifying the purchasing point of the card. It was unmarked, save for Stetlow's writing and the conventional printed matter on the opposite side.

Beneath the post card and the three letters, Nick found a last article. Three links of a gold watch chain. The two end links were twisted and pulled out of shape. With no immediate mental comment in this regard, Nick slipped it into his pocket with the post card. The letters he replaced, locking the box and dropping it into the cabinet drawer, which he in turn locked.

His attention was now turned to the windows, floor and minutest details of clothing. There were two windows. One looked out to the north and commanded a view of the links. The view was a beautiful one at that hour. The second window opened upon a grassy slope beyond the main wing of the building. Nick pulled aside the lace curtains at this window. The sole discovery of interest was a strange crack in the glass. It appeared on the lower half of the sash and had characteristic features. A stone, striking the pane, would have caused the break, for there was a tiny hole and then hundreds of infinitely small cracks flashing out from it and radiating in a circle. That it had not been caused by a bullet, Nick Carter was experienced enough to appreciate.

"Some one, at some time," he thought, "has thrown something up at the window and made that break in the glass." To satisfy himself, he raised the sash and looked out. At the top of the grassy slope a path ran along until it was lost among a dozen little rustic outhouses. The path was composed of snow-white, round pebbles, shiny and smooth of surface.

"Correct, it was one of those," Nick said to himself.

With what appeared to be a definite idea in mind, the detective moved all furniture that stood against the wall, and then, on his hands and knees, made a circuit of the room, looking under everything and in every small nook and cranny.

His painstaking search was finally rewarded.

In the corner by the bed, he found a small white pebble, not much larger than a good-sized agate. It was slightly flattened on one side and, while the pencil markings had been smeared, he read these words, traced upon the smooth surface in almost copperplate writing:

"We shall certainly expect you."

"The first stone failed to enter the room, simply cracking the pane," Carter ruminated; "Stetlow ran to the window, raised it, and another followed, missing him and landing on the floor. Stetlow saw the stone, picked it up and read what was written on its surface, but in sudden anger threw it to the floor. I am afraid for poor Stetlow; I am afraid."

Locking the hall door, Nick started to rejoin the

party. Halfway down the hall he met a neat-appearing Irish girl, in cap and write apron.

The detective stopped her quietly.

"Do you attend to these rooms?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"You attend to the room occupied by Mr. Stetlow?"

"Is he that fat man, the funny fellow?"

"The last room down the hall, on the right?"

"Yes, sir; that's Mr. Stetlow's."

"You attend it?"

"Yes, sir."

"When were you in there last?"

"What's the matter? Is anything missing, sir?"

"Answer my question, my girl. Nothing is gone, but I want to know certain things. When were you in that room last?"

"I think it was Tuesday morning. I cleaned it all up nice. He came that day."

"Now stop and think. Did you not go there after that—to the door or answer a call, or something?"

The girl fumbled with her apron and her brow wrinkled in deep if confused and bungling thought.

"I might have, sir."

"I thought so; now think again. You *know* Mr. Stetlow rang for you."

A sudden light flashed across the maid's face.

"Yes, yes, sir, that he did. It was Tuesday night. I remember now. He rang."

"At what hour?"

"It was late, sir; ten or eleven."

"You can't recall the exact hour?"

"No, sir."

"What did Mr. Stetlow want?"

"He was sitting in his shirt sleeves by the window, sir, and——"

"Which window?"

"Oh, that one on the side."

"I see. What did Mr. Stetlow wish?"

"He asked for one of the boys. And he seemed rather worried about something. I sent up Jimmy."

"Did you see Mr. Stetlow again that night?"

"No, sir."

"Did he have any callers?"

"I don't know."

"Where can I find Jimmy?"

"Oh, Jimmy; he's up the hall now, sir. Shall I call him?"

"If you please."

The boy, a bright-faced, intelligent white bell-hop, who knew his ropes and how to rake in the tips, remembered going to Mr. Stetlow's room. He said that Mr. Stetlow had paid him to run right downstairs and see who had thrown a rock through the window. The boy declared that he had discovered no one and had told Mr. Stetlow as much, whereupon the gentleman answered: "All right." It was late in the evening and Mr. Stetlow had the lights turned on full tilt. Nick Carter had established his theory and the official case was progressing.

When the detective joined the party on the porch, it was with a very positive opinion concerning the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Arthur B. Stetlow; an opinion that he intended to substantiate, not because he had been authoritatively assigned to the matter, but because, even off on rest leave, the Stetlow affair thrilled with much that was fascinating and unusual.

It was some moments before the men at the table settled back in their chairs, and Nick Carter's sudden announcement was received in a peculiar, not to say enigmatic, manner.

Kemp, of them all, was the more impressed, while Canning, and the startled audience in general, would not take the stern statement at its face value.

"Do we understand you to state that Mr. Stetlow has been murdered—that he is, at this moment, dead?" Kemp gasped.

"That is my belief," Carter answered.

"Oh!—then you only *think* so?"

"Is this supposition, Mr. Mede, based on something discovered in Mr. Stetlow's room?"

"Partially so."

"Tell us what that——"

But the detective shook his head.

"Remember, I am only an amateur, gentlemen," he declared, with a dry smile. "At such a time as I feel conversant on every phase of this unfortunate affair I will be pleased to give you my deductions. Until then—not a word. Of course, you will have an experienced man down from New York to handle the case, will you not?"

"That has already been attended to," Kemp returned. "Major Morley telegraphed yesterday. We expect a man to-night."

"A very sensible move, Mr. Kemp."

So far as Nick Carter was concerned, the porch gossip ended there. Nick, however, was prompt in his immediate movements. He sent two telegrams, both to Chicago, keeping the matter a secret. They were addressed, one to Stetlow's attorney, the other to his home, addresses being supplied by the club steward. Both messages were as follows:

"Has Mr. Stetlow friend by name of 'Jack'? Try to trace same—wire as soon as information is available."

And Carter attached his personal signature. The steward did not recall that Mr. Stetlow had a friend whose first name was "Jack."

The porch was deserted when Nick saluted Danny, his trusty chauffeur, and entered the big car.

"A nice ride this afternoon, sir?" Danny asked.

"On duty bent—yes, Danny. We've run into another bunch of trouble."

"I must be a hoodoo."

"Scarcely that, Danny, but a little case has cropped up that catches my fancy; not very sensational, but it promises to be interesting. I want to take a good look around up to nightfall. Run easily out to the pike and then Micklin Road. When you get there take

your time as we pass the links. I do not wish to attract any attention, either."

Danny had started the machine when a strange thing happened. Hilton Kemp called suddenly from the clubhouse door through which he ran:

"Oh, Mr. Mede," he hailed, "just a moment." He came up to the side of the car, Nick looking at him somewhat perplexed. "I know it's impertinent, but can I go with you on this trip? You're going over beyond Micklin Road, are you not?"

"Yes," the detective replied, reluctantly.

"I'm interested in such things—can I go?"

"Why—er—yes," Carter consented, still partially annoyed at Kemp's nerve; "get in."

In ten minutes they were on Micklin Road, a winding, snake-like way over the hills, through lines of dead willows and scrawny oaks.

"I might be able to help you," Kemp declared, "who knows?"

"He has the cheek of a brass monkey!" Nick Carter silently observed.

CHAPTER III.

DEATH ON A SUNDIAL.

"Here is the tree, Mr. Mede," Hilton Kemp exclaimed; "don't you want to look it over? You might find some sort of a clue, although I confess I've looked and couldn't discover anything."

"You can stop here, Danny," the detective ordered.

The three clambered out, and Nick first of all swept the surrounding country with a keen glance. It meant more to him, this glance, than he was willing to tell the persistent Mr. Kemp. The young man, however, continued to converse breezily, his tongue never ceasing; and Nick, who had studied his companion carefully, was compelled to admit that while Kemp had some undesirable qualities, on the whole it was impossible not to like him. Danny openly avowed his liking for Hilton.

Micklin Road lay about one mile from the clubhouse. It was flanked on one side, the left, for two miles or more, by the links, all beautiful, rolling land, well cared for, and with velvety grass, a series of bunkers, and the buildings of the club; and there were no houses along that two-mile stretch that Nick Carter could see.

The tree already spoken of was a bushy, round-topped oak. It was the only one along that section of the links, except for those across the road, and here there was quite a thicket and wooded patch. Indeed, to the right of the road, everything was wild and barren to a picturesque degree. As was true everywhere, at this stretch a neat stone wall, waist high, closed in the golf grounds.

Nick Carter, with Danny and Kemp not far distant, chatting as if they had known each other for years, jumped the wall and examined the tree and its immediate environments. For ten minutes he looked the place over rather helplessly. He was almost ready to pass on, when, quite by accident, he looked up into the body of the tree. Kemp, who had been closely watching him, ran up.

"What is it?" he inquired eagerly.

Nick, at first, was disinclined to answer, but Kemp's boyish enthusiasm and persuasive wheedling overcame the detective's resolution.

"The branches," he answered. "Look and you can see; some one has been hiding up there in the branches. They have broken one of the smaller limbs—it is a new break. Danny, give me a boost."

As Nick Carter dropped back to the grass he was nodding his head.

"From the looks of the break and the wood, I should say it was snapped not more than a day and a half ago."

"Do you think that somebody was hiding up there when we left Mr. Stetlow under this tree?" Kemp bubbled.

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Strange how you happened to see that."

"Not so remarkably strange. We were given eyes to use."

"Guess you've got a touch of second sight, Mr.—Mr. Mede."

Nick Carter turned on the lad quickly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing," and Mede grinned; "it was a compliment; that's all."

Carter appeared to have seen enough to suit him, for, after examining the stone wall, he scaled it, and, leaving his hat in the car, put on a green cap of the steamer variety.

"I want you to stay with the car until I return," he said to Danny; "I may be gone half an hour, or more. Mr. Kemp, Danny can take you back to the club and return for me if you desire it; I am going for a little junket in the woods over there."

"Oh, no, no, no!" the young fellow cried, "I couldn't think of it. Never been through those woods myself. I want to go along."

"Heavens, but he is persistent," Nick Carter mused, and aloud: "Well, come along then, Mr. Kemp."

They struck off into the woods directly opposite the tree, Carter examining every foot of the road. Kemp watched him with mute admiration as he discovered seven distinct paths through from the road, no two alike, and all in a space two hundred feet long.

"Now, right through here," Nick said, in a preoccupied manner. "I am going to walk rather fast now, Kemp."

"That's bully! Can't phase me. Run if you say so!"

Once or twice they came out into clearings where the sunlight glinted on glittering dogwood, and underfoot crushed pitcher plants sent up a dank, pungent odor of the silent woodland soil.

"Lonely as all get-out down here, isn't it?" Kemp observed. "Not especially exciting. By the way, I

wonder if any of the parties came over in this territory when they were out searching?"

"Doesn't look as if human feet had ever meddled in this belt to any great extent."

"I guess they haven't. A mile or so beyond, however, there's to be some big doings—or there *was*."

"Big doings?"

"Yes. Tract out there that poor Stetlow intended to buy; that's the reason he came down here—real estate. He was going to buy practically a whole town."

"Go deeper into that."

"I mentioned something about it when we were talking on the porch; don't you remember? Beula, the town beyond the woods here, has always borne an unsavory reputation. About three hundred Slavs, Italians and other foreigners back in through there. They live in rank old dumps and just manage to exist, trucking and the like. The land is cheap and they rent it for next to nothing. Sort of haven for emigrants when they first land, and don't know where to go. Backed by plenty of capital, I think Stetlow was negotiating to buy a tremendous acreage and plant it the first year in something. Then a canning factory was to be erected. It was big doings, I know that much."

"Did Mr. Stetlow go across to Beula that you know of?"

"No, I'm certain he didn't."

"Where were these negotiations being carried on?"

"I guess between New York and Chicago."

Nick Carter fell to thinking again, as they crunched deeper into the dark woods. Suddenly he stopped. The old trees reared their tall crests on all sides, with low branches and bushes intermingled. He stood absolutely still for a minute or two, head back, ears strained, and his breath scarcely audible. The almost majestic wood was silent in a weird, mysterious way.

"Did you hear anything?" Kemp inquired, in an awed whisper.

At first the detective did not respond. Finally he said:

"I guess not, Kemp, I guess not."

They walked on still farther and came to a little brook, winding with many musical protestations over a bed of shiny pebbles, as they crossed it on a rotted tree trunk that had obviously been placed there by human hands.

Ahead, through the rank growth and trees, Nick's alert eyes saw something that interested him. A dogwood silhouetted its dotted white flowers against the dark of a little glen, yet to its left, broken and gray and dismantled, stood an odd structure.

"Do you know what that is?" Carter inquired.

"No, I don't," Kemp answered. "I really can't imagine."

"We'll just look it over."

"Spooky out here, eh?"

"Peaceful, I call it."

"Something about the woods that impresses me in a queer sort of way," Kemp continued. "I don't know, but it's sort of ghostly and all that, don't you know."

The detective smiled.

"I'm afraid you're very young, Kemp," was his quiet rejoinder. "Now for the old house—looks deserted and—ah! What have we here?"

In a hollow beyond the log where shallow scum-covered water had collected, fed by rains, lay an object that was incongruous because of its surroundings. Nick Carter fished it out with a long stick and threw it out upon the grass and leaves.

"It's a cap!" Kemp exclaimed, and promptly turned very pale, his eyes staring in their expression. "Mr. Mede, it's *his* cap—Stetlow's cap—the red-and-green one he wore that day on the links!" The young man sank to his knees and examined it, his hands trembling and his entire manner suggestive of tense horror.

As for Nick, he remained calm, as if he had expected this very incident.

"You are certain it belonged to Mr. Stetlow?" he asked pointedly.

"Yes, I am."

"No chance for mistake?"

"None. Only one cap like that in the world, I guess. Stetlow liked loud things. He had everything made to order, even to caps."

"We are progressing, eh, Kemp?"

"I am afraid your prediction will come true—too true. Pardon me, Mr.—er—Mede, but for an amateur detective it strikes me that you show extraordinary ability."

"Think so?"

"You bet I do!"

"Kemp, thank you," and again Nick's grim humor was expressed in smiling eyes and trembling lips. "I have to hustle, you know; they're expecting that *real* detective here to-morrow. By the way, do you happen to know his name?"

"No, I don't."

"We'll have to hustle. Look at that sun; be down in three-quarters of an hour."

"Jingo! Infernally odd joint that!"

"That's what I was thinking."

And, indeed, Kemp's curiosity and wonderment was not without positive justification. As they came nearer and nearer their amazement increased. In the centre of the little glen, and with the bubbling, unassuming stream curving to the right, stood a low, one-story gray stone building. The masonry was beginning to fall away from sheer old age; and moss, together with clinging vines, was trying to hide from view the decayed ugliness of the picture. As to just what it had been used for, there might well be a question. Square in design and with only two windows, now partially concealed by the vines, the porch around two sides had tumbled apart, and through the crumbling stones weeds and small bushes were sprouting.

"Say!" Kemp exclaimed, stopping in his tracks. "I think I might guess what this was, at that."

"I'm quite anxious to know," Nick Carter returned.

"Some twenty years ago, I've heard them say, before this county was built up to any degree, they tried Connecticut tobacco culture, just as I heard Stetlow intended to do. It was a failure, of course, and the man—he was a Cuban with a big bank roll—gave it up as a bad job. He built a sort of home out here at that time, where he used to entertain his Cuban friends. They even made their own hot stuff—drinks. I'll bet we've struck Perro's plantation, or what's left of it."

"Rather romantic."

"Failure always does have a romance hanging around it somewhere. What's the matter!"

Nick Carter had abruptly sprung around the side of the house, waist-deep in weeds. He was springing along like a deer, and it was all Kemp could do to follow.

"Go slow!" the detective warned. "Here we are, Kemp—— Heavens! but they made a picturesque affair of it. If you're inclined to be a 'fainty' stay back a moment!"

"Not on your life. I want to see what you're talking about," Kemp retorted, crashing through a pile of brush and reaching Nick Carter's side.

Nick's preliminary warning was well founded. Kemp gave a quick, sharp cry as his eyes sought the raised, open knoll five feet across from where they stood.

What was shown to be an old-fashioned stone-and-cement sundial, of larger lines than the ordinary garden type, topped the knoll. It had a fat, bulbous base, then thinned down and ended with a dim gray marble slab, about two and a half feet square.

Lying upon this slab, feet dangling over one side, arms the other, and head back-tilted, was the body of a stout man in a posture that death alone could have produced.

Nick Carter's quest for Mr. Arthur Stetlow was at an end!

CHAPTER IV.

SOME VERY INCONGRUOUS CLUES.

"It's Stetlow—poor Stetlow!"

"Yes, Kemp."

"But, how—how did he come out here?"

"We have that to learn, Kemp."

"You look at him first and see what did it."

"That is my intention."

A searching and most thorough investigation of the body made the following facts ready for tabulation in Carter's index file booklet; a system invariably persevered in by the detective when a case was of sufficient importance to justify this care. It was a system, in truth, that had proven immensely valuable, dovetailed as so many of his assignments were.

"Death of Arthur Stetlow due to unusual wound in temple, inflicted by stone hand of sundial, said hand triangle in shape, of granite, and eight inches in length at longest side. Three sharp points, where point of hand struck temple, cut through skin and crushed in portion of skull. Either blow sufficient to cause almost instant death. Blood stains on dial hand. Found in weeds two feet from dial stand. Stains on one point only. Grass very much trampled around dial. Blood in pools on pile of rock a short distance from dial stand. Crime evidently committed here, victim's head having been placed on rocks as blows were struck.

"Stetlow rather portly. Nice face, full, and minus marks of care. Must have been of sunny disposition. Coat torn in two places, arm and shoulder. Man probably carried some distance, necessitating the labors of at least two strong men. Absolutely nothing in pockets of coat or breeches. Was known to have watch. Gone. Every pocket completely rifled. Expression of face not far from normal. Death blows struck when victim was insensible. No bruises or wounds except on head. Dead somewhere in the neighborhood of 24 hours, possibly more."

It required considerable mental and physical effort on Kemp's part to approach the body and look down upon the set face. It was not a pleasant sight, and Nick could sympathize with the young man. He covered the head with his handkerchief and made a detour of the old yard for fifty or eighty feet in all directions.

He gave it up eventually, for the slanting rays of the sun through the trees gave timely token of the calm early summer twilight. It was still more grewsome and still as darkness approached. When a lone bird cried from a thicket, with mournful note, Kemp looked questioningly into the dim depths beyond.

"Let's go back, Mr. Mede," he suggested.

"Not afraid, are you?" Nick asked.

His companion flared up instantly.

"No," he said, drawing himself up curtly, "I'm not, but I have enough feeling to wish to avoid this sort of thing. Remember, Stetlow was one of us. We will not look upon it as merely an incident of the day."

Carter looked up at the young man with increasing interest. Kemp was at once fascinating and "different." His voice rang true, and yet with a certain dash of pride and defiance in it that Carter did not come in contact with daily.

"I didn't mean it in that way," he declared. "No one dislikes death—in this uncanny form and in such environments—more than myself. Let me see. It is now after five. Danny will be wondering what has happened to us. I want to look through this old rookery, however, before I return. We will not touch the body. In an hour we can send a party over for it. On second thought, it would be an injustice to the dead to leave ill-fated Stetlow out here alone—absolutely alone. There may be a vagrant animal or bird around to desecrate the body, although it has re-

mained on the dial one night at least. Would you mind going back to the road alone? Jump in the machine and have Danny take you back to the club. With all the discretion at your command get a party —an official, or the coroner of this community if he can be found quickly. Better bring along something as a litter, and three lanterns. We can take Stetlow back in my machine."

"I am at your service, Mr. Mede."

"That's fine! I'm glad you came along, now, Kemp, although, to be frank, at first I couldn't quite see it."

Kemp grinned and was shortly lost in the shadowy woods beyond the brook.

For a few moments the detective sat on the crumbling stones of the old porch—thinking—thinking. He had been very fortunate up to this hour. Fate had played kindly into his hands, yet not without personal study of the case in hand. Obviously, it seemed, from a logical basis, that by one of two ways only could Stetlow have disappeared from beneath the tree on the golf links. He could have been stunned by a blow from behind if, as Nick now believed, an enemy had been hiding just over his head in the branches of the tree; then a carriage or automobile could have been utilized to carry him here. Far more likely, however, from Nick's way of reasoning, was the theory that cheap criminals with cheap methods—hirelings, no doubt—had bided their time and dragged Stetlow, carrying him a part of the way across the road, through the wood, and so on to the old house by that rather tedious route. The finding of Stetlow's cap in the pool beyond the little stream was rather clinching evidence. Reasoning from the same theory, at least one human link in the chain forged for the death of the rich real estate magnate was a mighty "small potato"—a climber of trees and a tosser of pebbles through windows. He could see that it might become necessary to send Chick to Chicago. A definite decision in this regard could be made that night or the first thing in the morning.

Beula, the trucking hamlet, had to be visited also. There was work ahead, and yet work of a character to stir Nick Carter to his very finger tips, and to whet his appetite for the solution of the mysterious and dastardly crime.

After these reflections he entered the old Cuban's ruined house, jumping across great gaps in the porch and floor. He was compelled to use his flash, inasmuch as the two small windows were shadowed by the climbing vines; the roof, in fair condition, being flat. He found the interior damp and chilly, with a rank mustiness that was anything but agreeable to the nostrils. There was dust a half inch deep with every foot he walked, nor had it been disturbed, apparently, for those twenty long years mentioned by Kemp.

It was rather disappointing, too, for Nick Carter had half expected to find within these gloomy walls some clue that would lead him on. No one had entered by the porch door; this was conclusively shown by the dust.

He refused to be discouraged, however, and plodded through the grime to the adjoining room. Neither were furnished and the drab, discolored plaster walls loomed uninvitingly in the glare of the flash. Two wooden doors at the end of the second room had fallen in, leading no doubt to a cellar below, and it was here that the detective found his first important clue. That door had unquestionably been tampered with, and very lately, too. A rusty old hinge had been wrenched loose, and in several places the wood was splintered and torn away entirely. The last one to handle the two battered doors had deliberately kicked them in, in a spirit of angry spite.

The dust had settled again over what had been distinct shoe prints on the floor—a confusion of them—running this way and that, the trail leading to a low, open window at the end of the room. Nick placed his flash on the floor, and tugged until the doors came up, falling back upon the cement floor.

A flight of stone steps was revealed. Seizing his flash and pressing the button, the detective slowly descended. Once more the air was heavy and disagreeable and it was charged with the scent of burned wood and smoke.

It was a cellar room, some thirty feet square, in which he found himself, with masonry on all sides, and even more shabby and time-eaten than the remainder of the house. Moreover, having no ventilation or door apart from the trap, it was intensely dark, and the flash shot a keen bar through it, dancing on the wet and beaded walls.

To the right of the stone steps there were three large cement boxes, that might have been used in years past for storing bottled wines and other liquors. Nick Carter took each in turn. The first two were empty. The last one held several grewsome articles: an old worn black sock, cut and slashed and stiff with blood; a shoe, also cut as if with a knife, and what had once been a handsome watch. It was Stetlow's watch, for, despite its battered and hammered condition, the initials A. B. S. could be traced in monogram on one case—the other was missing. The chain was found in a corner of the bin, but it had been detached and had suffered at the hands of a vandal also. These inexplicable discoveries in no wise lessened the mystery of Stetlow's murder; if anything, for the time being at least, they tended to cloud it.

As an additional puzzle and a climax to his wonderful adventure up to date, midway to the steps the flash illuminated the dark-red silhouette of a human foot, stamped in blood which had thoroughly dried. At infrequent intervals the detective found drops, but no other foot marks. The outline was almost perfect, and the foot a fraction larger than normal, with toes spraddled. The shoe in the chest had been cut from the foot responsible for that imprint and the sock could be similarly provided for.

But whose foot was it, and what had caused the wound?

It was during these vital discoveries and personal reflections that Nick started upward from the floor, every sense alert. He had heard a suggestive clicking sound from above, whether in the house or yard he knew not, but this time he was not in error—he *had* heard something.

CHAPTER V.

WHO FIRED THE SHOT?

To remain in that abominable hole and permit some sneaking scoundrel to throw the doors back across the stairway was a possibility not to be thought of for a second. Nick Carter sprang up the stone flags, three at a bound, his flash showing him the way in the gloom.

He had spent more time below than he had at first reckoned on, and as he gained the second room he saw that night had closed in.

Into his side pocket the detective dropped the flash; his revolver took its place and he moved with great caution. Now he realized that the noise must have originated from without. If any one had been indoors they would have been caught by Nick in his dash up the steps and through the two rooms.

Standing under cover of the door, he peered out and across the rock-strewn portico. A big, spectacular moon was hanging over the crest of the black trees, but within that little glen it was bright only in patches where the silver scattered down through softly waving foliage. Small armies of early crickets were working in concert and a tree frog down by the little creek made its guttural throat heard above rustling leaves or other magic sounds of the night.

"Must have been some small animal," Nick Carter muttered, "and yet"—he shook his head vehemently—"that was a different noise; a clicking, rasping noise. I'll just take a look out in the garden. If anything happens to Stetlow's body at this juncture it will be decidedly embarrassing."

He kept wondering, he recalled afterward, as he stepped from this patch of shadow to that, in the direction of the old sundial, why it was that Kemp did not return with Danny and assistance; why the time appeared to be so absolutely interminable.

The dial stood slightly in the open; at least, the nearer tree was fully eight feet distant, and the moonlight struck it squarely. Nick Carter was not long in ignorance of the fact that some one had been tampering with Stetlow's lifeless figure. It had been pulled half off the marble slab, and clung to it only in a scant way, very much as if some one had started to make off with the body when they were interrupted.

Carter was shocked and surprised. He wished to satisfy himself, however, that some curious, prowling dog or other animal was not responsible for the act. With this idea in view, he coolly crossed the open, weed-grown patch from the shelter of the trees and was bending over Stetlow when, unexpectedly, a vibrant, echoing crack sounded across the open.

It was the teasing bark of a repeating rifle.

He had been ambushed.

Three shots sounded at irregular intervals, as if some rascal with an indefinite idea of his aim in the darkness and moonlight combined was watching the effect of every shot.

Nick did exactly what was left for him to do; he could not rush back to the cover of the trees, for they would pick him off if he tried that. Dropping behind the stone base of the dial, on the side from which he had made his run and from which up to now there had been no firing, he drew both revolvers—and waited. Their missiles so far had gone wide of the mark, yet they had him at a terrible disadvantage.

What with the open glade flooded by the moonlight and their own safe position under the blackness of the trees, a brave stand was Nick Carter's only hope.

He had stirred up the enemy at last. In some respects it was like the phantom texture of a dream—a nightmare—bathed over in the liquid silver of a fated night.

Stetlow's arm dangled about his head. He caught it, and, stiffened as it was, shook it so that it could be seen from the circle of trees.

Immediately a rifle cracked.

That was what Nick Carter was waiting for. They had mistaken the moving arm of the corpse for the detective. Both of Carter's revolvers banged a challenge at the selfsame instant, but apart from a dozen weird echoes, the shots appeared to have been in vain.

He had aimed at the point from whence the rifle fire splurged, momentarily illuminating a meagre spot in the darkness of the woods.

Nick suddenly flattened upon the ground, the weeds all but covering him as he lay prone.

From three sides spots of red and yellow flame gave warning of another set of tactics. Men must have been scattered around the semi-circle of trees, except that bunch just behind him.

A concerted movement was in progress and the volley would soon tell its grim story, for now the dial served as a fortress on the one side only, and they were shooting around it.

Nick did not waste any more ammunition; it was rather futile to pump lead into the depths of the dark.

Just the vague outlines of dim figures loomed in the fringe of shadows. They were approaching, for Nick Carter could spot them by looking up cautiously through the weeds—four—six—a half dozen, and all armed with Winchesters.

Into that streaming glen an ominous figure lurched—six feet, if an inch, running at top speed for the dial, as rifle shots, covering his approach, made it less dangerous.

Carter saw him coming only when he was within a few feet of the sundial, for the fellow was slinking along the stone base as a possible protection from the sleuth's anticipated fire.

With the smoke rolling back from the trees until it fell in an ill-smelling blanket over the weeds where Nick Carter reclined, he heard a shot, absolutely distinct from the others—a revolver shot—and from somewhere to the rear of the dial.

The giant in the open leaped straight into the air, a despairing cry bubbling from his lips. He toppled over backward, falling heavily to the grass.

That mysterious shot seemed to act as a check to the others, especially when several prolonged shouts sounded in the woods:

"Hel-lo-o! Mr. Mede!"

Kemp's voice rang out, clarion-clear.

There was nothing cowardly in the way he ran out to the dial, followed by Danny and five or six men.

"I have had some excitement since you left, Kemp!" the detective panted.

"What were those shots? We could hear them after we left the road."

"I was ambushed. Naturally suspect some of those Benla rascals. They were trying to steal Stetlow's body when I surprised them."

"Steal his body!" Kemp exclaimed.

"Yes."

"But what reason would they have to do that?"

"I couldn't tell you."

"Anything new?"

"I'll tell you later—we want to get out of here. Yes, I have discovered a few things. Did you manage to get the sheriff or the coroner?"

"Both. That's what made us so late; we went down to Cessville for them."

"Splendid work. I want to speak with the sheriff. Point him out to me."

"He's the fellow with the sandy beard by the dial; they're looking at Stetlow's body now."

"Sheriff," Nick Carter interrupted, "I'd like a word with you. I want to——"

He was in turn interrupted.

A man of unprepossessing front, thin, sharp of eyes, and wearing glasses, deliberately stepped between Nick and the sheriff.

"This isn't any time for chinning," he snarled, frowning at the detective. "Sheriff, we had better look around and see what has happened."

"Don't mind him," Kemp whispered, drawing Nick aside. "That's Varney, the Chicago sleuth—the one the major sent for; an old friend. He has been in New York for a week and when this mystery started, the club, on its own responsibility, sent for Varney. He is a good man, the major says, but a little abrupt."

"Never heard of Detective Varney," Nick Carter admitted. "I should advise him, however, to be a little less abrupt." Then turning to the sheriff, he continued: "When you have a few minutes at your disposal, sir, I'd like to speak with you."

He found to his chagrin that neither the county official nor Varney paid the slightest attention to him.

It was a pretty frosty deal.

Nick had self-possession and he deemed it wise and necessary to exercise this quality for the present. He had not made himself officially known, nor had he been assigned to the case. This was his "vacation trip," after all.

Kemp was standing apart from the crowd. There were several of the more important club members who had insisted on joining the party, and three burly assistants, deputized by the sheriff to lend a hand. Lanterns twinkled across the garden like fireflies, but the woods to the rear of the house, with that lurking menace of men, had grown strangely silent after the fusillade. They had evidently spotted the sheriff, and knew him far too well to start any unnecessary bloodshed where so many were concerned.

"I'd like to know one thing, Kemp," the detective asked. "Who was it that picked off that giant in the glade as he was about to 'do' me?"

Kemp looked surprised.

"I thought you did it," he exclaimed.

"I—not at all. Why, the shot came from back there in the shadows."

"I didn't do it. Nobody in our party did—I'm absolutely certain, Mr. Mede."

"No chance for you to be mistaken?"

"Why, no."

"Very, very strange," Nick mused.

"Perhaps it was an accidental shot. One of the rascals shot his own kind."

"Impossible."

"Then you will have to figure it out for yourself. I do know that a gun wasn't pulled by our party until after that chap was done to death."

"Did you tell the sheriff or the coroner that we—that I—had found Mr. Stetlow?"

"I said he *had* been found."

"No names mentioned?"

"None."

"Good again, Kemp—good—I didn't care to be mixed up in it."

"Quite modest."

"Discreet; make it that."

But Kemp winked and looked very wise.

Carter skirted the excited crowd and poked around beyond the dial until he came upon the figure of a man dead in the weeds—his giant assailant. The detective brought his flash upon the scene instantly.

It was a big Swede, bathed in a crimson tide that came from a heart wound. He was dressed in an old pair of pants, a red shirt, open at the throat, and his crude brogans were mud-covered.

Nick went through his pockets thoroughly without finding anything. A knife of the clasp variety, and a rifle, had fallen near on the grass.

"A mighty fine shot for a moonlight night," the Little Giant ruminated, as he bent over the victim a second time.

He felt a rude nag at his shoulder. A glance backward brought Varney, the Chicago sleuth, into his range of vision.

"Who are you, anyway, fiddling around here?" Varney inquired harshly.

"An amateur detective, off on his vacation," was Nick Carter's dry response, rising.

"Well," finished Varney, "Mr. Amateur Detective, I think we can dispense with you—get out of here!"

CHAPTER VI.

A ROGUE IN PEACOCK FEATHERS.

"If it had been me, Mr. Carter," Danny said, with fire in his eyes, "I would have knocked the block off that little piece of sheriff."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't, Danny," Nick Carter advised.

"But I know I would. He was insolent all the way. Wanted to tell me how and when and where to drive the machine."

"He is an officer of the law, Danny."

"Officer, my grandmother; he has about as much ordinary sense as a fried egg, and as for that other mouse—that Chicago detective!—he's the limit, too."

"Came in sooner than they expected, I see. How did he get in the machine?"

"Did he get *in it?*" Danny ejaculated; "why, confound him, he owned it after he'd been on the drive one minute from the club. It's my private opinion, Mr. Carter, that he's also a two-by-four!"

"Danny, your 'private opinion' receives my immediate and most hearty commendation. Mr. Varney is a 'squirt.'"

"He says he can clear up this case in a jiffy—why don't you show him a thing or two?"

"It's not my case, Danny."

"But you are a guest at the club. You like to——"

"Danny, do you forget?—this is my humble vacation. Now run downstairs like a good fellow and see if there are any telegrams for me."

"I think there are, sir."

It was six-thirty of the morning after that grim discovery across Micklin Road and Danny had hurried up to receive instructions about the car.

As to the closing of the old house incident, it ended as Nick had most desired. His own part was most inconspicuous. He had been finally compelled to tell how and when Kemp and himself had discovered Stetlow, but he was not asked, nor did he offer, any of his expert opinion. Strange as it was, neither the sheriff nor that upstart, Varney, penetrated to the cellar of the old house.

They looked through the two top rooms, but found nothing to excite their curiosity when they knew that the footprints were those of Carter, who had taken refuge in the place while waiting for the party.

Nick did not quarrel with the Chicago sleuth, and received whatever was said with commendable silence, when his temper was taken into account.

Before Stetlow's body was taken to the car, and previous to the leave-taking of the party, Nick Carter made a bundle of the things he had found in the cement wine chest, and that bundle was concealed in the car by Danny.

The dead Swede, killed by that "mystery shot" from the woods, was identified as a tough customer from Beula, but as yet the identification was incomplete. His body had been carried, temporarily, to Cessville.

Nick had now reached a point from which he intended to work tirelessly and systematically. In a very short while, from nothingness had sprung a dozen important "leads." He hoped to sift every one of them.

Up to date, the green enameled box was the most vital of all existing clues, and from it Nick had no doubt would spring the sure solution of the strange murder of Arthur Stetlow by an unknown person or persons.

Danny brought the first two notes of failure and disappointment. He appeared with telegrams—three of them. One was signed "Joseph," Nick Carter's house man, who seldom left his Madison Avenue house, his mission being one of silent guardianship over that domicile. It was brief and to the point, for in wording a hurry call to his assistant Nick had couched it in unmistakable language:

"Both Mr. Chickering and Patsy called out on important matter. Will advise you further at later date.

"JOSEPH."

The other messages were from Chicago. They stated that no such person as "Jack" could be traced as an acquaintance of Mr. Stetlow. Regretted this had proven true.

The telegrams greatly displeased the detective. If he could locate "Jack," the "Jack" mentioned on the leather post card found in the puzzling green box, that personage could doubtless tell why he had warned Mr. Stetlow, and what had brought about the odd entanglement. "Jack" was apt to prove a very elusive individual, however.

"Danny," the sleuth declared quite solemnly, as he settled back in a chair and puffed at one of the club's best cigars, "we are not working quite as we would in New York or under ordinary circumstances. The boys are away from us. We are practically alone. I had meant this for a vacation and, in a way, I still think it is. I'm working out in the open, and can see the glint of green foliage once in a while. We have a rather ugly game ahead of us, but I am inclined to stick to it and to see it through, if for no other reason than to badger our mutual friend, Mr. Varney, of Chicago. I do not intend to allow my identity to become known to the members of this club, if I can possibly help it, and I want to ask you, as a special favor, to assist me in this respect. I am Mr. Mede, nothing more. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Carter, but still, why not out with it? Why not tell them who you are?"

"Danny, I wouldn't do it now for the world."

"Must have your own private reason, sir?"

"Yes," with some hesitancy, "yes, I think I have."

"Any new instructions now, sir? I think that Varney would like to use the machine whenever he takes a notion. He doesn't know it belongs to you."

"We will eventually forget that there is a Mr. Varney. Immediately after lunch, I want to go to Beula. You will have the machine ready."

"Yes, sir; anything else?"

"Not that I call to mind, Danny."

Nick Carter had breakfast one half hour later in the regular breakfast room of the club. It was an amusing incident to him, that his quiet repast was accompanied by innumerable sly glances from every quarter. Already, as an "amateur detective," he had established a local reputation, and there was no doubt but that Kemp had been a factor in this chatter. He was still sipping his glass of iced tea when Lanning wandered over.

"How did you do it, Mr. Mede?" the fellow remarked, in his emaciated, sallow fashion.

"Do what?"

That was the way Carter answered it.

"Verifying your statement to us, Mr. Mede. You said Mr. Stetlow had been murdered; and it rather looks as if you had won out on that supposition. We are all wondering how you could know such a thing in advance."

"Let us call it, well, 'intuition.'"

"A most remarkable 'amateur,' Mr. Mede."

"Thank you."

"What do you think of that Chicago detective, Mr. Varney?"

"I know absolutely nothing about him."

"He seems to know his business."

"We will assume that he does."

"He says that the case is easy and that he will have no trouble."

"He should know, Mr. Lanning. We will not dispute him."

Nick Carter broke away from most undesirable company as soon as he could politely, and steered for the front porch, where the cool, morning air wisped across the open stretches, and the view from the stone pillars was exceptionally fine. In front of the veranda stretched a well-kept road, fringed on either side, as it meandered through miles of populated country, by the bungalows of the best families of the state and of the county.

Nick selected his favorite corner seat, looking out upon this road, as a matter of personal gain. He wanted to be quiet, and he wanted to think. The majority of the tables were farther back along the floor.

For at least one hour the detective occupied this secluded position, his chair hidden by a large, squat piece of masonry that ran straight up to the roof. Things then began to liven up through the threads of his cigar smoke. The road was busy with dog carts, pony carts, automobiles from surrounding lodges and clubs, and even persons on foot.

Only once, during his stay there, did Nick Carter look up. It was well along toward nine o'clock.

His single glance repaid him.

Down the road, from over a green slope, two persons were approaching on horseback. He watched them for at least a quarter of a mile before they eventually stopped at the club porch steps.

The horses steamed from the exercise.

The masculine end of that pair interested Nick Carter, and the interest was born of past experience. He half imagined, from the very start, that he recognized the poise of the body, the swing of the frame, the very haughty indifference of the man astride.

"It's Tom Brevert," the sleuth exclaimed.

And it chanced to be absolutely true.

It was not at all the old Tom Brevert that Nick Carter had known not so very long since, but a spick and span Tom, a Tom dressed in the very latest fashion; Brevert of the immaculate riding trousers, the spotless white tie, and the swaggering air of a millionaire's lackey.

For the benefit of those who have not met Mr. Tom before, we would say that Nick Carter's one exceedingly swift experience with him had been sufficient to place Tom under the ban of the law. Brevert had murdered the aged butler in the home of one of the detective's clients to satisfy his own revenge. The butler, who also had charge of certain saddle horses, had been approached by Tom, to execute a certain piece of dirty work. Driven from the mansion by a stern parent and forbidden to call upon pretty Miss Minton, whose affianced Nick knew well, all of the hatred of Tom's character came to the surface. He wanted the aged Ephus to "fix" the saddle of the horse ridden by Miss Minton's affianced. Eph refused and would have told his master, had not Tom anticipated the approaching danger and murdered the old man in a clothes closet of the big house. The job of "attending" to the saddle was left to Ford, one of Brevert's choice acquaintances. Unfortunately, the scheme did not work out quite as had been anticipated. Ford was not of the high-brow order, and he fixed the wrong saddle in a blundering way. In consequence, the young woman was thrown to the road. The accident did not result seriously, on the other hand, and Tom found himself checkmated at this end.

Besieged by debtors and chagrined by the loss of Grace Minton, whom he really adored, in his big, brutal way, Tom immediately plunged into dissipation and crime. He came from a good old family; his father, a banker of the middle class, had tried every conceivable method of correcting the faults of his boy. Nothing could be done. Tom's final stroke was to steal a round sum from his father's private safe, substituting a painted papier-maché safe for the original. Nick Carter arrived upon the scene just too late to capture Tom, and since then the young fellow had managed to conceal himself marvelously well, for Nick had resolved to bring the young scamp to justice.

This flashy appearance upon the scene of Mr. Brevert, Jr., came as a total surprise to the detective. True, indeed, Tom was wonderfully changed. He had raised a cute little black mustache that altered his whole expression, and he was wearing his hair long, the fetching black curls poetically curling about his shoulders.

He might have passed for the rich son of a social family, what with his stylishly cut riding habit, his face brown and glowing with the natural colors of health, and the self-possessed swing of his well-proportioned figure. Tom was "there with the goods," to use a bit of expressive vernacular. Nick Carter, with an amused light in his eyes, now turned his attention to Tom's companion.

She was a young woman of twenty-one, perhaps, straight as an arrow, athletic, commanding, dark of hair and complexion, and evidently accustomed to horses, for she managed her animal like a veritable circus queen. That she was not in Tom's class, Nick could see at once, and it puzzled him to make out Brevert's particular method of "mixing it" with the colony's best in a social manner. Across from the club, not more than a half mile distant, there were twenty or thirty summer homes, costly and modern in every respect. New York families spent months here, and used the links or clubhouse, to which they were naturally eligible, whenever they so selected. Tom and his beautiful companion had ridden down the glittering white pebble road from that direction. The detective's position on the porch was shielded, and about ten feet from the main entrance.

A man in livery took charge of the horses, while Tom and his companion swept self-reliantly up the short path to the steps, the former assuming an air of superlative distinction that ill became him.

They were on the point of entering the double doors when Kemp strode out, laughing, as if he had been jesting with some one inside. He almost ran into the approaching pair, and for one full, dramatic minute Nick Carter watched the sparkling play of sham and counter-sham. Tom Brevert's lips were sneering as he caught sight of Kemp, who, in turn, had grown as colorless as snow. But the young woman had an equally interesting part to play; she reared her beautiful head back with a sort of cold disdain, and did not see poor Kemp at all.

It was one of those chilly, freezing "cuts" that might well cause a shiver to pass through the recipient.

CHAPTER VII.

ON TO BEULA.

Nick was not to be left long in doubt as to the secret of that bit of social passage at arms, recorded in our last chapter; for Kemp, in a dizzy, blind fashion, staggered across to the table at which the detective was seated, and sank into a chair, his head in his arms. The pose was one of deep dejection. Luckily, at this early morning hour, the porch was well-nigh empty. Any conversation between them was not apt to be overheard.

"You seem to be troubled over something, Kemp," Nick said, patting his impromptu friend on the shoulder; "what is it? Are you willing to confide in me?"

The young man looked up and Carter could read abject grief in the troubled, pale face.

"I am in trouble, Mr.—Mr. Mede," he said.

"A girl, I presume?"

"Yes, a girl."

"Who is she? I saw that little affair at the double doors just now."

"Miss Stanwood, of Cresthaven."

"Cresthaven; that is just up the road from us?"

"Yes; a swell villa."

"Why did she act so curtly? Come right out, Kemp; I'll confess a liking for you. If there is anything on earth that I can do for you, name it. I thought the porch episode extremely discourteous and cheap."

"It's all *his* fault, Mr. Mede."

"Ah, the man?" and Nick Carter was more than ordinarily interested.

"Yes."

"Who is he, anyway? I've never seen him around here before."

"A stranger—something in trousers without a pedigree, I'm satisfied; but he has the fascination of the candle flame for silly, fluttering moths. He seems to have made good."

"Of course I know nothing about that and——"

"Wait, I'll tell you. I have been down here, Mr. Mede, for some three months. I'm not the lazy kind, although my father has plenty of money. When I work, I work right. In town—and I'm speaking of New York—I met Miss Stanwood. She belongs to one of the best families. I liked Miss Stanwood—I like her still; I am just unaffected enough, sir, to state that I love the girl. We had a bit of a quarrel before I left for the club. When she came down here, I went to see her several times at her father's country place, but it didn't go just right. Then I cut it out, although it made me very unhappy indeed. Last week I noticed that she began to go out with this Mr. Stanley Pierce, and——"

"What was that name, please?" Nick Carter inquired, dubiously.

"Stanley Pierce."

"Where does he come from?"

"That is what is worrying all of us. He has had some sort of introduction into the sacred fold, but I never saw him before. He seems to have plenty of money, and he has been going with Miss Stanwood since his arrival. He has a card to the club, but he seldom ever comes here. I think this is his second visit. They are down in the grill."

"You know nothing of his pedigree?"

"Nothing."

"No member of the club is associated or acquainted with him?"

"Not to my knowledge. He keeps very much aloof from us. I imagine that he thinks he is too good to associate with us."

"But he has plenty of money to spend?"

"More than enough—he squanders it."

"Have you spoken to Miss Stanwood since she started her flirtation with the man?"

"I have not, and, if you will permit me, I take exception to the word 'flirtation.' She is too good a girl to engage in that sort of thing."

"Would you call it infatuation?"

"I do not know what to think."

"How long did you say Mr. Stanley Pierce has been in this neighborhood?"

"A week, not much more."

"Did he ever come to the club alone?"

"Once, I understand."

"Did he know Mr. Stetlow?"

Kemp expressed surprise.

"Why, no, no," he responded quickly; "I never heard of such a thing. I never saw them together."

Little more of moment took place during their conversation. When Kemp took his departure, Nick could readily see that the young man was depressed in spirits. The love affair was deeper seated than any casual observer might imagine, and the detective made many mental notes of the peculiar conditions.

Carter made it his special duty not to permit Tom Brevert to see him. He even went to his room by the side door, ascending the stairs secretly and avoiding the handsome grill. While Tom believed himself perfectly safe in his social disguise, he was sure to know the sleuth if he once set eyes upon him, and this Nick Carter studiously avoided.

Tom was to be allowed to run to the entire length of his rope, for, in a fashion, Nick believed that the young rascal was connected with the Stetlow matter. Exactly what that connection was it remained to be seen.

At half after ten, a groom brought a saddled horse for the detective. It was a full-blooded, beautiful white animal, and Carter felt that he had a beast of mettle and real stamina. Danny had made all preliminary arrangements, and as Tom and his fair companion had taken their departure, Nick could work without fear of discovery. It was his full-fledged intention to go at once to Beula, the settlement of the immigrants.

His reason for not using his machine may well be imagined. The very presence of a high-power car in that section was apt to excite suspicion, especially as the sheriff and Detective Varney had been seen riding in it on official duty. Horsemen were not unusual over those splendid roads. It was by far the better way, especially as Nick intended to cut through the woods beyond Micklin Road on his journey to the village.

He had reached almost the exact location of the tree from which poor Stetlow had disappeared, and was thinking of cutting across into the wood from the road, when a man jumped in front of his horse. It was Detective Varney, smug and domineering, as usual.

"Howdy," he saluted, mopping his brow with a big 'kerchief.

"Good morning, Mr. Varney."

"Say, I've heard about you," the Chicago sleuth ventured.

"Something good, I hope."

"I heard you started out on this case. I heard it was you that found Stetlow, and Lanning, of the club, told me that you even predicted his death before anybody knew anything about it. What's your business, anyway?"

"I might prefer to keep that to myself, Mr. Varney."

"Well, I simply wanted to know out of curiosity. You seem a clever sort of chap, at that. What made you think Mr. Stetlow had been murdered?"

"It was only a guess."

Varney stood silently in the road, as Nick's fiery steed pawed the dust.

"I'm going to get our man," the Chicago man continued.

"I'm glad to hear that."

"I've seen several things out here."

"Doubtless a man of your reputation, Mr. Varney, should have no difficulty with a simple case like this."

"Who said it was simple?"

"Oh, I just meant it must be simple to a professional man of your ability, sir."

This appeared to please the sleuth.

"It isn't so blamed simple," he answered. "Where you going?"

"For a little ride."

Neither received more information from the other than this, and, still smiling, Nick Carter rode on a quarter of a mile and then cut into the woods, heading for a path through the more open ground that would take him past the deserted Cuban house.

After that, covering a period of at least two hours and a half, events were not only clouded to Nick Carter, but they buzzed with mystery and human interest. He knew this much: that he rode on a splendid, fiery animal through peaceful woodlands, where great trees towered, and not a sound broke the stillness. He knew that as his horse picked a way across the little stream not far from the old house, the animal stumbled, lost its footing, and fell forward on two weak front legs. He knew that insensibility followed, as his head came in contact with one end of the long log, and then—and then——

Consciousness again.

The same grotesque trees on every side, the same patches of blue overhead, seen indistinctly through the foliage; the murmuring of a stream, and—pain—a pain that was tingling through every fibre of him. He realized, intuitively, that the horse had stumbled,

that he had been thrown suddenly upon his head, and that he had remained unconscious for some time, perhaps half an hour.

But how could he explain what had happened in that time?

He was seated, back to a tree, in a normal position. About one wrist a bandage had been wrapped, soaked in arnica, and that wrist ached terribly.

A few feet beyond, tethered to a tree, stood the fine white horse. It was a most incongruous and extraordinary proceeding; yet, as far as he could discover, to left and right, before and behind, through the whispering trees, not a living soul was to be seen.

Nick felt of his wrist, with its careful bandage, and could appreciate the soothing influence of the arnica. Some one had taken him in kindly custody; had wrapped his wrist and had attended him with all the care of a trained nurse. Some one had also seen to his horse, and it was now his to command, yet there was no living emblem of this solicitude present. It had been accomplished in secret.

Long after he had gained the saddle, Nick Carter fretted over this, the latest mystery of his vacation trip.

A secret force was in silent operation, for his own well-being, for his good. It worked surely, yet with no trace behind that might prove an identity.

Some "good friend" was "on the job."

The detective rode past the grim, compact pile of devastated masonry that had once known life and merriment. He even caught a faint glimpse of a certain sundial, back amidst the down-trodden weeds, but he did not alight from his horse, keeping on to the open country, bent on reaching Beula as soon as possible.

He knew that he was nearing the town long before he had gained its actual heart, for the poor, cheap, straggling homes told their own story; cottages with tin roofs and meagre gardens; sparse little homesteads that breathed the abject poverty consuming them.

Beula was far from beautiful, yet why the struggle to sustain and to nourish it?

Beside the winding, tortuous road stood a blacksmith's shop. It was nothing more than a shanty, with a main open shed for the regular work and three pathetic, patched-up living rooms to the rear. If any one would know the straggling village, dotting the slopes and hills for three miles, it was very apt to be the blacksmith. Nick Carter dismounted in front of the open side of the dingy shed. A swarthy fellow, powerful of build, was working the bellows, and the current of air sent the little showers of red-hot sparks up from the heart of the glowing coals. There were no horses to shoe, but the man was patching some bit of garden implement. He glanced up coldly as he saw Nick enter.

"Good morning, sir," the detective began suavely.

The blacksmith simply nodded his head and went about his business.

Beula's citizens were prone to be decidedly suspicious.

"My horse took a tumble back through the woods," Nick persevered; "I wish you'd look over his shoes; one may have been loosened. Here is a dollar."

The money had its magic influence, especially as there was absolutely nothing wrong with the shoes on the white horse outside; yet Nick had forced his opening.

Carter had asked a number of unimportant questions concerning Beula, its plans and the system of ownership, and was gradually swinging the conversation around to cover a certain "town guard committee," of which he had heard something at the club, the members of which could, if in their estimation it was necessary, deal out their own plan of punishment and secretly punish the enemies to the best interests of the section. In the midst of this talk, the detective suddenly heard a man's voice outside on the road. The white horse was being slapped admiringly on the flanks and some one was addressing the animal with terms of frank appreciation.

As Nick had been startled on the porch of the clubhouse that same morning, so did memory again revive the identity of another old-time acquaintance. The voice was easily recognizable. Beula could claim, mayhap, as one of its valued townsmen, an old Chicago rogue of surpassing dexterity and cunning.

Carter, after his affair of the missing bonds, in which a certain bald-headed, squint-eyed individual had figured heavily, looked up the Chicago pedigree of his shrewd and elusive criminal. "Droopy Mac" had been jailed for penmanship, misdirected three times, and his picture formed part of the rogues' gallery collection.

Nick Carter had traced the theft of the Minton bonds to "Droopy," who had gone so far as to take up temporary quarters in a large mansion next to the Minton house. The owner of this building happened to be abroad and the house was closed. From this point of vantage, "Droopy" and his colleagues, among whom Tom Brevert might be mentioned, and Ford, who had been lodged in jail, effected their famous bond deal. It so transpired, however, that "Droopy's" son, Charlie, was the sweetheart of Miss Grace, and a right fine, honest fellow he was, as Nick had discovered. As soon as Charlie discovered that his degenerate father had left Chicago and was operating in New York, he came on. By a system quite his own, he had recovered the stolen bonds from his father, and Nick Carter had handed them in turn to the Minton estate, with no comment. Blood proved to be thicker than water, on that night Nick captured "Droopy Mac," for the son liberated the father and pleaded with Carter to let the case drop there, inasmuch as the bonds had been returned to their owner.

But that was Droopy's voice on the road, and the detective had no wish to be spotted. He felt that Tom and Droopy in the same neighborhood could be taken as a guarantee of crookedness.

Nick did not have a second to spare as he sprang behind the smoke-colored forge and bellows. A man entered, garbed roughly in a flannel shirt, with his dark trousers tucked into leggings, and wearing a cap. He was holding a small package in one hand and greeted the blacksmith effusively.

"It's 'Droopy,' all right," the Little Giant thought with exultation, for there was no mistaking the hang-dog face with the peculiar and unprepossessing squint of the eyes.

"Droopy," not being aware of the presence of a third person, having cast a casual glance around and failing to see Nick Carter behind the forge, in the shadows, unwrapped the little package, removing at least three windings of ordinary newspaper.

"Say, Jasper," he said hurriedly, "I want you to get rid of this—melt her; turn on your hot stuff over there."

He held out an odd, square object.

Nick Carter had difficulty in restraining himself. That object was a little green, enameled box—the same, or a counterpart, of the one he himself had discovered in the locked cabinet drawer of Mr. Stetlow's clubhouse room.

CHAPTER VIII.

DANNY IS PLACED IN COMMISSION.

Danny was under Nick Carter's big touring car, flat on his back, with grease on his face, his hair rumpled, while he cleaned the mechanism and put the auto into slick shape. It was after the lunch hour, and Danny's pride in that machine amounted to a mania. It never suited him unless it sparkled. As a chauffeur, no New Yorker could beat him. He could dive through traffic as easily as he could take an open road. The car had been quartered in a small garage up the road from the clubhouse.

"Hel-lo, you," a man standing impatiently in the open door of the garage hailed abruptly.

"What is it?" Danny snapped back. He did not stop work for a second.

"Whose car is that?" the stranger continued, as if in a great hurry.

"Mr. Mede's."

"Where is Mr. Mede?"

"Out horseback riding for a change."

"I have a proposition to make to you. I'll give you twenty-five dollars for the use of that car for the afternoon—and take good care of it, too."

Danny pricked up his ears. He was beginning to think he knew the owner of that voice, and after Carter's story told him of Tom's unexpected presence in the colony, he was now almost sure that the maker of this startling proposition was none other than the young scamp, Brevert.

Very fortunate it was that Brevert had never actually seen Danny in broad daylight. Such conquests and captures as had been made in the previous bond case had been under cover of Riverside Drive darkness.

Danny crawled out, in his impromptu disguise of grease, grime and oil.

"I can't do anything like that," he answered, reluctantly, all the while interested and wondering what Tom was about.

"Oh, come on; your boss'll never know," Brevert wheedled.

"He'd find it out sure; besides, I wouldn't, couldn't think of letting a stranger run the car."

"Then you go along. I've just got to have a car, and mighty quick at that."

"How much was that you said?"

"I'll give you twenty-five dollars right now."

"Where you want to go?"

"Oh, up the road a piece, to Beula. Know where that is?"

Danny started. He would have taken Tom Brevert for nothing, in any event, knowing that it was in line with what Carter would have commended.

"No, I've never been up this way before."

"I'll tell you the road."

"How many going?"

"Two; just two."

"If I get into any trouble in this deal will you see me through?"

"Of course I will. It's simply an accommodation, my fine fellow, for which I am willing to pay liberally. I belong to the club and"—here Tom began to lie with his old fluency—"I know everybody over there, of course. Is it a go?"

"Confound it, I'll go you," Danny blurted out.

"Then run your car out. It's almost three o'clock, and I'm behind time. Do you know where the Stanwood residence is? Head up this road until you reach the big red cottage; it's the third house on the cross-road, a white residence. I want to go there."

"I'm mighty messy to drive a car. Can I——"

"Don't bother about cleaning up. I told you I was in a hurry. Here's half of the money. I'll give it all to you when we return."

"Can't stay out too late."

"Don't have to."

Just as he was, smeared and dirty, Danny jumped to the front seat, saw that Tom had made himself at ease behind, and steered for the Stanwood home.

They were not kept waiting long, for pretty, dark-eyed Miss Stanwood soon tripped down the veranda steps, joined Tom in the car, and away they darted, not by the clubhouse road, but to the right, and around the shell drive, which eventually turned into Micklin Road, some three-quarters of a mile below.

Danny was all ears, and the conversation he heard was substantially this:

"I thought you didn't intend to come," the girl declared.

And Tom answered effusively:

"I had some trouble in securing a car. It's all right now."

"They want me back before tea."

"Oh, that'll be all right."

Brevert gave instructions for Danny to proceed along the Cessville Pike that ran into Beula, five miles from Micklin Road. Danny was now beginning to feel that, after all, his trip might amount to nothing. Weary of the horses, the two had naturally longed for an auto spin, and Tom had made the best of a hard proposition, as there were very few cars in the colony.

They chased through Cessville and made for the narrower road to Beula. A mile down this way and the forest trees began to hedge in the course, almost meeting above their heads. It was as still and as gloomy and as mysterious as the section in the vicinity of the old Cuban's tobacco plantation.

Tom and Miss Stanwood were chatting volubly; Tom, in fact, in a fashion that was beginning to arouse the suspicions of alert Danny.

"I'll just bet he's up to some game," the chauffeur thought.

The road was not an exceptionally good one and Danny was forced to keep his eyes on the alert continually. The car ran into a secluded little stretch, still bounded by big trees, when Tom called for a halt.

"Stop here, I'd like to gather some of those wild flowers," Brevert suggested, as he swung outward to the step.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the catastrophe fell, startling in its sudden dénouement. While Danny had anticipated some sort of scheme, he was not at all prepared for what actually took place. The road swarmed with men. There were at least ten of them, and their make-up was alone sufficient to arouse the curiosity of one new to the plan.

Roughly dressed and in the toggery of the open country, their faces were covered with diamond-shaped pieces of green cloth, through which a single eyelet had been scissored. At the two extremities of each diamond strings were attached, and these in turn made fast around the back part of the head. It was simply a new species of mask, and grotesque at first glance.

Danny figured it out with keenly alive senses.

Tom Brevert was acting a preciously clever part, and he must have known of this hold-up at its inception. His desire to stop the car that flowers might be gathered was simply part and parcel of a prearranged plan. He was playing into the hands of a friendly coterie.

Miss Stanwood screamed aloud in her fright.

Danny did not attempt to run the car ahead, mainly because two of the rascals had sprung into the front part of the car and were after him in deadly earnest. He did, however, manage to whip out one of his revolvers and he let fly with a chance bullet in time to catch the man nearest the step in the chest. He gave a wild yelp of pain and tumbled backward to the road, half under the machine, while his comrade grappled with the brave chauffeur.

"Help! Help!" he heard Miss Stanwood scream again.

Never for an instant was Tom Brevert a factor in the tragedy. Danny did not hear, nor did he see him once, from then on.

Between furious blows with a man masked in the green diamond shade, whose nose he had tapped none too gently under its soft folds, Danny saw several things—ants of men, climbing over the car, here, there, everywhere, and two of them dragging the half-fainting Miss Stanwood to the shelter of the deeper woods, despite her half-smothered supplications.

* * * * * * *

Nick Carter, partially concealed behind the old forge and the hanging bellows, in the Beula blacksmith shop, knew that, sooner or later, "Droopy Mac" was certain to discover him, and, moreover, "Droopy" had no cause to so soon forget the detective.

Recognition would be certain and instantaneous.

"What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

This from "Droopy," who, with wrinkled brow and squinted eyes, was watching the face of the swarthy blacksmith with a puzzled expression on his own sharp face.

The blacksmith was grimacing, jerking his thumb backward, over his shoulder, and, through sign language, was attempting to warn Droopy of something, warning him to keep quiet, to close the deal right there.

"He's trying to tell the strong-arm professor that I'm on the job," Nick thought, with a dry smile.

But he resolved to see it through in silence, just the same.

"Droopy" was not slow to "catch on." He quickly wrapped the mysterious little green box in the paper again, his face turning a bit white as he did so.

"Got to attend to this here gentleman first," the blacksmith declared.

Nick Carter stepped out from the forge.

"I trust I do not intrude," he said calmly.

It was the only graceful way out of it, after all.

Droopy came very near throwing a fit, so great was his consternation and astonishment. He could not fail to recognize the detective, for their relationship had been of long standing.

"Carter, by thunder!" Mac exclaimed.

"At your service, Mr. Mac."

Droopy turned, with a flash of anger in his tongue and eyes upon the blacksmith.

"When did this float in, eh?" he thundered.

The other did not appear to quite grasp the situation. He stuttered and was uncertain of speech. Droopy, on the other hand, was as active as he had ever been in the past. He was standing near the smoking forge and two or three handles of hot irons protruded from the bed of half-cold coals. In a twinkling he had snatched one up and, its end slightly red, it sailed across the room, aimed accurately at the detective's dodging head.

"Grab him—he's wrong!" Droopy snarled.

This was a sufficient tip to the brawny blacksmith.

Quick as Nick generally was, he could not escape the flying iron. To begin with, the throw had not been expected. He saw the trailing flash of black iron with its red tip and fell to one side. The full force of that deadly missile did not reach its mark, but the black end of the iron came in contact with his head. Nick Carter's whole mental panorama became a seething, bubbling, glittering mass of darting flecks, as the end of the bar struck him.

He tried to fight back the will of nature, but it was useless. A stunning blow had been delivered and he was compelled to yield to the inevitable. He sank to the soft earth of the shop, quivering of limb.

He was not rendered entirely unconscious, though his wits were a bit clouded, while recognition of all that passed around him and alertness of hearing remained unimpaired, as he lay outstretched upon the warm earth.

Droopy was giving hurried instructions.

"It's Carter, the New York detective. He's down here, by heaven. This won't do, Hamm, this won't do. He'll have us as sure as sin. Close those doors."

The light became suddenly dim and uncertain, as the blacksmith must have swung the double doors shut. Only a bit of radiating red from the smouldering coals of the forge illuminated the scene.

Droopy was at it again, jabbering like mad:

"Hamm, that's a dangerous critter. I know; I ought to. He's a New York sleuth and a meddler for fair. Now is a good time to settle his hash. If you've got the nerve we'll do it; yes, we'll do it, do you hear me?"

It was the old Droopy hatred and insane rage coming to the fore.

Droopy was a madman when under this baleful influence.

Strange as it may seem, Nick, in that dazed period, was scarcely hearing the conversation. His eyes were restless in their upward search, however, as Droopy's figure lurched over him. He was watching a dangling watch chain that hung below the man's shirt. It was a very, very short watch chain, unusually and suspiciously short, as if certain links had been eliminated.

Immediately Nick Carter's befuddled brain became busy. The green box, the same one he had seen displayed a second before by the unsuspecting Droopy, had contained a broken series of watch-chain links—gold links. They would fit the chain now dangling spectacularly before his eyes.

Such retrospections as he might have engaged in were speedily cut short as four hands rudely gathered him up and tossed him to the left, smoke and cinders flustering into the air at every move; for Droopy and the blacksmith had tossed Nick Carter directly upon the forge, his shoulder blades amidst the hot coals, and Droopy himself was reaching for the bellows, a fiendish glare in his maniacal eyes.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE CLUTCH OF THE "DIAMOND MASKS."

There was no doubt at all but that Danny fought like an infuriated little tiger, as he saw hope gradually fading and several pair of arms encircling him on the front seat of the touring car.

Courage is all well enough, but it doesn't stand the ghost of a show when pitted against superior odds, and that was what poor Danny was facing.

They had him down and out in a jiffy, and while he had nipped one rascal with a bullet and ruined the expression of several green-diamond-masked faces, it counted for very little in the long run.

He was completely and emphatically outnumbered.

Bound and helpless, he now stood by the side of the road. Tom Brevert had vanished into thin air and even Miss Stanwood was among the missing. A big red touring car stood majestically under the trees at the side of the road, the leaves whispered talkatively, one to another, and a half dozen closely masked men, all armed, were going about their peculiar business in a systematic and silent fashion.

The strange part of it was that no one said anything. The secret organization evidently had a well-established code of communication, and it was this dread silence that finally got on Danny's nerves.

Tom Brevert's part in the affair he could easily surmise. It was a straight case of abduction, for some reason or other, and Tom had been playing, intentionally, all along into the hands of the enemy. Miss Stanwood was a captive. The stop for flowers was prearranged along that lonely road to Beula. Tom's time to make a get-away had been provided for.

The machine was left standing where it had stopped, a red dash of color on the landscape. The half dozen men and Danny slowly and methodically worked away in the direction of Beula, the chauffeur's heart very heavy and his pride actually crushed. Could he have surmised or known, at this moment, that the big red touring car would mysteriously appear on a scene of action, not so long afterward, manipulated by most secret and mysterious agencies, he might have looked with less concern upon the whole adventure.

But he did not know—and it was just as well, as we shall soon see.

A dreary, tedious tramp, ending in the soft summer twilight, did not tend to make Danny any happier. He was guarded by two masked men, who steadfastly refused to even utter a single word, and Danny, accustomed to much freedom and activity, fumed and fretted in his tantalizing bondage.

"Mr. Carter would be ashamed of me," was his only thought.

No sooner had they tramped cautiously out into the main road, of the Beula division, than the chauffeur speculated upon their destination. Across from the road, a straggling stone fence had been built and beyond a weak little showing of sickly grain waved above its irregular surface. Danny was half lifted

over the wall, and the solemn procession continued, a guard being placed nearest the road, to watch for any chance passers-by.

The same blacksmith's shop wherein Nick Carter had experienced such thrilling adventures loomed in the twilight a quarter of a mile ahead, and, as they were not walking with any great speed, it was almost dark when the rear of the place was reached.

The man who had walked near the wall tapped on the low door of the right shanty wing. He waited for a second or so, but was not rewarded for his trouble by an answer.

Again he knocked and waited, and again a smothered oath escaped from behind the diamond mask.

Another man drew up, and there was a whispered conversation. The second individual skirted the house, fussed around in front by the road for a while, and returned, shaking his head. He signified, as Danny took it, that there was no one in the house.

A broken sash was raised three feet from the wing door and the obvious leader, a man with large, flat feet and short neck, clambered through. The door was then unlatched from the opposite side, and they all trooped in.

The room proved to be small and ill-smelling, as if seldom ventilated. Not only that, it could not be that the blacksmith used it for a living room, inasmuch as it was comparatively bare of furniture and trappings. At one end there was a low table, covered over with oilcloth, and a long bench a few feet in front.

While these arrangements were far from elaborate, Danny immediately came to the conclusion that the room to the rear of the old blacksmith shop, because of its remoteness from other homes and dwellings, had been frequently used as a meeting place for the silent committee, formed by the citizens of Beula to correct imaginary infringements upon their rights and to deal out vengeance as each personal member, in consultation, considered best. Beula was lingering on the brink of destruction if the moneyed interests bought up the property; and as it was far enough away from current methods of civilization, the rough class residing there did very much as they pleased.

Again, that the Diamond Masks had fully expected to meet some one here, or, at least, to find some one on the ground, was an evident fact, as demonstrated by their actions on reaching the shop.

An old lantern was lighted and swung to a rafter, amid the grime and dust.

By its light Danny could the better watch the operations of this clumsy but painstaking gang of cutthroats, and these same operations were of the greatest possible interest to him, especially when the leader of the crew approached him and had a word to say, for the first time.

From behind the mask a guttural voice sounded:

"We have nothing against you; conduct yourself carefully and all will be well."

"Sounds really like a fancy drama," Danny thought, and aloud: "You bet you haven't anything against me. I was running that car for strangers. I had nothing to do with it."

"But you can't go just yet."

"I'd like mighty well to."

The man in the mask appeared to laugh.

"Doubtless; but we may have to go against your personal desires in the matter."

"I'm worrying about that car you fellows left out on the road."

"No need for worry; we'll attend to that."

The end of the conversation was brought about by the opening of the lot door, the picket stationed there having given and received the countersign.

It was quite dark without and the usual jarring notes of a country night sifted into the dim little den. Danny was somewhat surprised at the freedom allowed him, but he sized it up most sensibly. They did not suspect, for some reason or other, that he was Nick Carter's assistant, and Tom did not know the difference. The chauffeur's part in the programme was practically nothing. He had been bribed cleverly enough to do a certain thing and he had accomplished it with no show of antagonism.

The two men who had raced to cover with Miss Stanwood reappeared in the open door, bringing the girl with them. She had been treated with less consideration than Danny himself, for she was bound, and a gag had been placed over her mouth to prevent her from making any outcry.

Danny could see a pair of startled, terrified eyes above the cloth bandage, and she was trembling between her two captors, in the throes of a terrible fear.

"Oh, the scoundrels," Danny thought; "if I could get at my guns I'd have a try at you for this. I wonder what they're up to now, anyway."

He was not to be kept in doubt long.

A box was pulled up to the long pine table and the girl was thrust upon it. The lantern, in turn, was lowered to the table.

The same man who had previously questioned Danny—and he had a rather pleasing, well-modulated voice—approached the trembling young woman, leaning across the table, his two hands flat upon it and his scintillating black eyes beaming out from the opening in the green mask.

"Miss Stanwood," he began, in a kindly tone, "we regret exceedingly that we should have been compelled to do that which we have done. It is not the most pleasant or agreeable thing that might take place and we know it. We desire your promise that you will try and control yourself. No danger confronts you."

Miss Stanwood had courage of her own, it was evidenced.

"My father will make you suffer for this indignity," she cried.

The removal of the gag and the bandage had made it possible for her to talk freely, and, while her face

was still deadly white, her eyes bore the gleam of an awakening defiance.

"It will do you little good to talk in that vein, Miss Stanwood," her masked captor suggested.

"I talk as I feel, sir. You are a pack of cowards—and—and you know it if you have even a spark of what we know as manhood."

"Extenuating conditions surround many cases, Miss Stanwood."

"The fact remains that you are cowards."

"Be that as it may, although our ideas differ, you are being held temporarily against your will. That captivity is to be continued until we hear from your father."

"From my father!"

"Yes."

"I do not understand you."

"You shall in a moment. You must write a letter to your father now, to-night, at my dictation."

"I see," she cried suddenly, "an abduction with a money reason. I refuse to write a line. You can kill me first."

"Be careful, Miss Stanwood, be very careful."

"You have not made a coward of me, I wish you to understand."

"That was not our purpose. Slaves we out here have been to the richness of the club district, while you have gloried in all that money could buy, you of the colony have had more than you could eat and drink; have had beautiful homes to live in, carriages to take you where you would go, and now even our little they would take away from us. Your father was connected with Mr. Stetlow in all of this. You know what happened to Stetlow. We would not visit this upon your father, for he is not so much to blame; but dollars shall not buy our privileges, as Heaven sees them. This earth was not made for a few to own—it was made for the many."

"That is socialism," the girl retorted bravely.

"Call it what you will, we deserve and demand our ransom. You must write to your father that he will never see you again if he is not willing to concede to our demands."

"And what are your demands?"

"Twenty thousand dollars."

"I will write no such letter."

"You must."

"But what if I refuse?"

"You will endanger not only yourself in the life of your father. We are desperate."

"Indeed, you must be, to force a woman to your accomplice."

"We will not discuss the ethics of the matter, Miss Stanwood, if you please."

"But business ethics—yes."

"You have heard what I have to say. I voice a community, not the wishes or the desires of one man alone."

"Still, I refuse."

The voice of the man behind the diamond mask became strangely stern, all in a second, with a flash of temper behind it.

"Perhaps, Miss Stanwood, you do not quite realize the situation," he declared.

"I think I do," the girl replied coldly.

"But you *must* write this letter. Otherwise, Miss Stanwood, we will not—I will not, at least, be responsible for what happens to your father."

It was one of those thrusts that went directly home. It left the girl in despair. Danny fretted in his own bondage as he heard every word that was being said.

"Do you mean that they will kill my father?" she asked.

"I might intimate that, yes, Miss Stanwood."

"Please tell me what you would have me write."

"You must, under your own signature, state that you are now held and that, according to your own judgment, it will be best for your father to pay the amount named."

A pad of common writing paper was thrust out upon the table and a pencil placed in the hands of the trembling, white-faced girl.

"Now, Miss Stanwood," was the calm demand, "will you write?"

Danny felt every nerve tingling.

"I hope she has the nerve to say 'No,'" was his silent, speechless comment.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER MYSTERIOUS FRIENDSHIP.

Even in his dazed condition, Nick Carter could understand that the two men intended to make an end of him. He knew, moreover, that Droopy was almost a fiend when he was crossed.

They had deliberately thrown him across the forge, atop the still hot coals, and, Droopy, with a sturdy arm, was pulling the arm of the bellows. In his frenzy of rage nothing was beyond the man. As he had come to see the green box clue forever destroyed in the white heat of the flames, so would he see Nick Carter mutilated and tortured over the same forge fire.

Droopy had never been quite right or normal in his actions. He was impelled by a certain personal devil within him to do things that were neither balanced nor measured by good judgment. Education, at one time, had been his share, yet, once degeneration set in, all the learning he possessed only made him so much the worse.

"Man alive, you're not going to do that?" Nick heard the blacksmith inquire.

"Oh, shut up," Droopy returned.

"But some one might come in!"

"Not through those closed doors. Watch 'em. I'll have this man; I'll break him, by Heaven; he's been interfering long enough, I tell you."

All this while the heat surrounding the detective was something unbearable. It appeared to eat up

through his coat and consume his shoulders with a breath of fire. The reason for this was evident. Droopy was working the bellows, and while the fire had died down somewhat, the slightest touch upon the bellows handle revived the latent flames.

It simply meant that Nick Carter, in his inanimate state, would be eaten alive by the fire if rescue was not shortly at hand. Already his clothes were afire, for he could scent the smoke from burning cloth and could feel the tingle at his shoulder blades.

Again Nick swooned.

The tribulations of that day and the blow from the hot iron had been too much for him.

The last he remembered was an indistinct view of the hazy roof above and the hood of the forge. Sparks were jutting out on either side and the heat was smothering. He was gasping for breath that was not obtainable. The webbed rafter swung round and round in the darkness and there were the never-ending darts of light, ending in a mysterious nothingness.

What followed was a blank—one of those stretches filled with the vagaries of a disordered mind.

His awakening to consciousness was equally startling and spectacular.

The first sensation was of speed and of action.

Then there came a dampness at the brow. Some one was mopping his head with a wet rag and it felt good, very good indeed. The time must have been late in the afternoon, for the sky above, seen through trees, was red streaked and beautiful. The air as sweet as perfume, heavy with the odors of the earlier summer flowers.

All of his old-time self-possession and strength came back in a second, for he was not seriously harmed. He raised himself on one elbow and brushed against a person who was administering first aid to the injured.

Then his eyes blinked rapidly open.

"Chick."

It was in the shape of a quick ejaculation.

"Sure; who else?"

"But—but—hang it, man, I didn't——"

"You didn't expect to find me down here. Cheer up, the worst is yet to come. There are others."

"But this is the machine; it's——"

"Right again, my hearty; the touring car."

"My car?"

"Yes."

"How did I come in it?"

"You have to leave that to yours truly."

"And Droopy, what of him? Droopy and that rascally blacksmith?"

"We have now the honor of Mr. Droopy's company."

"He is in the car?"

"You better bet he is."

"How did all this happen?"

"Possibly by accident."

Nick Carter had not recovered sufficiently to raise himself above the seat of the touring car. It was spinning gracefully along a country road that looked strangely familiar, and a total stranger was at the wheel. Chickering Carter sat beside him, and there was a certain huddled figure at the feet of both. The twilight was as gorgeous as some Hudson twilights can be, if they feel so disposed.

"Chick," the detective resumed, trying to even his voice, "I want an explanation of all this."

"Ask anything you like."

"I remember being thrown on the hot forge and Droopy at the bellows."

"Yes."

"Then things went dark."

"Quite naturally. I guess I was needed at that particular time."

"But what the devil are you doing down here? I sent a telegram by Danny only this morning. Joseph answered that——"

"That a reply would come later."

"Yes, he did."

"Well, this is the reply."

"Still I do not follow you. I may be stupid and——"

"Glad to see me, just the same."

"I should rather say yes. What happened there at the blacksmith's shop?"

"Broke in."

"Managed to get the best of them, eh?"

"Yes, in the good old-fashioned way, Nick."

"But how?"

"Simply jumped through the door and used a gun. I clipped the blacksmith; winged him. He got away. Droopy here was easy. I had him down and out before you could shake a—well—a rat."

"But the car?"

"Funny thing about this car. Found it lying idle in the middle of the narrow path that runs through the woods from Micklin Road."

"And you took possession?"

"I think I know the car."

"Then how did you strike the shop?"

"Followed the road to the pike, looking for trouble. I saw the white horse in front, and then—then, of course, I was certain that I would find you within."

"You talk in riddles, Chick."

"Not in the least."

"You knew I was in the shop because there was a white horse outside?"

"Yes."

"Give me your reasons."

"I knew that you went from the club on a white horse."

"How long have you been here, you—you—reprobate?"

"That would be telling."

Nick Carter was beginning to become vexed. It looked as if, even on his vacation trip, the office and his assistants could not be parted from him. Were they working in some secret fashion that would not

bear the clear light? He was almost angry when he turned to Chick.

"I demand a clear explanation," he said.

"Oh, no, not that. Remember, you're away for a pleasant little outing. We do not have to answer to you, neither Patsy nor Joseph nor myself. You left no word with us."

"I telegraphed you to go to Chicago."

"Sorry, but we received no such message."

"Then you were away at the time?"

"We might have been."

"Here?"

"I'm not saying."

"I don't understand this mystery-making of the whole affair, Chick, and I'm frank to say that it doesn't exactly please me. I'm thankful for what you've accomplished and all that, but what brought *you* down here? What made you ever think of coming? I certainly didn't suggest it. My telegrams were——"

"I haven't seen them, Nick. Sorry, I know how you feel, but I'm duty bound not to say a word at this time—just at this particular time. Don't ask me, for I can't tell."

"It leaves me like a perfect dunce, Chick."

"Not at all, not at all."

"Where are we bound for now?"

"The club."

"Who is driving the machine?"

"A man I picked up on the road."

"Is he reliable?"

"Perfectly so."

"One more thing, since you are such a man of mystery, may I ask if you took the precaution to look around the blacksmith's shop before you left. Did you manage to discover a certain green box that was destined to be destroyed on the forge?"

"Nick, that was one of my first considerations. It is right on the seat with us."

"Anything in it?"

"Nothing. I've looked."

"Do you know of Droopy's doings here?"

"To a limited extent."

"But you absolutely refuse to explain all of the marvelous workings of this affair?"

"Just now I do."

Nick Carter settled back in the car seat, nursing his bruised wrist and the bump on his head, where the iron rod had struck it. Both wounds had been skillfully cared for in the meanwhile. When he turned to his assistant again, it was with a puzzled and questioning air.

"You will at least allow me to make several observations of my own, several guesses," he commented, with a dry grin.

Chick nodded his head, also smiling.

"It was you who fired that strange shot in the woods by the old deserted house, when I was ambushed behind the sundial?"

"Yes."

"No one else could have made so good a shot."

"Thanks, Nick."

"How did you happen there?"

"Again you trespass. Remember, you are on your vacation."

Nick Carter fostered a species of dislike for all this that he could not conceal.

"Very well," he finally responded. "Now, another thing. I tumbled from my horse in the woods coming across here. Who wrapped up my wrist and placed me against the tree, tethering the white horse?"

Chick bowed with mock solemnity.

"You did?"

"Yes."

"Then you were hanging around the vicinity of the old house?"

"I guess that's about the size of it."

"But why didn't you let me know?"

Chick settled back, as Nick had done, comfortably in the car, giving a gentle kick to Droopy, who, bound and helpless, was a silent witness to all that had been said.

Not a word more of information could Nick get from his assistant. Nick's head was drumming and he was not feeling his old self when the big car rolled up solemnly in front of the clubhouse. The porch was crowded, although the hour was well along and the lights were burning under the colored roof.

As Chick and Nick reached the steps a man was just coming down.

He was followed by an admiring group and the detective was not slow in recognizing this hero of the hour.

Mr. Varney, of Chicago!

"Yes, I have my man," he was saying, and the group of men, with cigars trailing smoke, walked with him out to the path. "I knew I'd get him."

Nick was instantly alert.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he declared, "but do I understand you to say that you have your man—in other words, the man who murdered Mr. Arthur Stetlow?"

Varney glanced up disdainfully.

"That is exactly what I mean," was his pert response.

CHAPTER XI.

IN WHICH A YOUNG LADY IS RESCUED.

Fanning happened to be in the company, and he had evidently been a late arrival. He flattered the Chicago detective to an alarming extent, and that dignitary consented to elaborate upon his findings for the day. He squatted upon the clubhouse steps and the crowd gathered about him in breathless interest.

Nick Carter and his assistant lurked very much in the background.

"It was just like this," Varney said pompously. "I knew all along that if I hung around that old house I'd find my clue. I've been in the neighborhood for twenty-four hours. This afternoon late, I was looking through one of the windows of the old place when I saw a figure skulking through the underbrush. I watched him for quite a while and, when he dived into the woods, followed him. I caught him, sirs, in the act of burying a blood-stained shirt in the ground. That was what he was doing and he was all confused when I covered him with my revolver.

"'Do you know anything about the Stetlow murder?' I asked.

"'Yes,' he replied.

"'Come with me,' I says."

Varney cleared his throat for action.

"After questioning the fellow, a stranger to these parts, I found that he was unwilling to give a fair account of himself. I took the bloody shirt that he was burying and the man, as well. They are both in the county jail. I think my work here is about over."

"What was his name—who is he?" some one in the crowd asked.

The Chicago sleuth flushed.

"I know where I stand," he retorted hotly.

After he had escaped to the dinginess of the open road, Nick Carter and Chick were seated in the shelter of a stone post. Nick was noticeably worried.

"Wonder who it was he got?" the detective speculated.

"I think I can imagine," Chick chuckled.

"Come, come," Nick Carter exclaimed, "I'm tired of all this mystery. I do not credit Varney with any capture until I'm dead sure of it. If he has the man, then all my deductions have gone for nothing. I would say that we have our man out there in the machine and, that reminds me, Chick, bring him up to my room. He will be kept there for the night. Tomorrow he goes to New York in the car."

There was some club chatter concerning that transformation scene. Droopy was not a very pleasing specimen, and there were some who saw him as he was walked up to the detective's own room on the second floor. That made no whit of difference with Nick, who was impervious to common curiosity. He deposited his captive, squint-eyed as usual, on the bed, bound and at his mercy, and, with the door closed, calmly talked over matters with Chick.

"Varney thinks he has his man?" he said.

"I should judge that from his conversation."

"Then you knew that Varney was here?"

"I did."

"But will you not now make the whole matter more clear to me?"

"Sorry, but I can't, Nick."

"Still, you'll admit that you have been a sort of guardian angel."

"You honor me beyond justification, Nick."

"Where is the green box?"

"I brought it up with me from the car."

"Good. I want to learn something for my own satisfaction."

Nick unlocked the bottom drawer of the cabinet. He found the other green box where he had last left it, untouched, apparently.

"One fits into the other," was his speculative comment."

He verified this by personal experiment. The box that had been in Stetlow's lower cabinet drawer since the crime was the width of tin larger than the box Droopy had brought to the blacksmith's shop. One was made to fit into the other, as is often the case in secret storehouses for valuables. The scrapings which Carter had first seen and wondered at on the interior of the cabinet box had been caused by the frequent withdrawal of the other case, a nest-egg arrangement.

The discovery appeared to relieve and satisfy Nick Carter. He arranged Droopy Mac's position on the bed so that he was bolstered up by pillows, and faced him, swinging around his hat. Chick stood at the foot of the bed, looking down at both.

"Droopy, I have you this time," the detective remarked, as if in casual conversation.

But Droopy only squinted nervously and said:

"How so?"

"You murdered Stetlow?"

"Did I?"

"Yes, I'm morally sure of it."

"You need proof, Carter," returned Droopy, hunching his shoulders and blinking again; "proof is necessary, isn't it, even in the best regulated of courts?"

He was as calm and as collected as ever.

"But I have the proof, plenty of it."

"Go as far as you like," Droopy smiled.

His hand still bandaged, from the woodland accident, but with every nerve tense, and eyes glittering with determination, the detective reached across the bed. He had plucked a pencil from Chick's pocket, and with this as a baton, he was measuring off every word.

"Mac," he said, "I want to tell you a little story about yourself. Varney may not know it, but I do. When you left New York after that little bond deal, when your son was your sole salvation, you were right up against it. Roughing it was in your line. You came up the Hudson, to Beula, and you had not been in the settlement ten minutes before you knew what was about to happen. The land was to be purchased by a rich land company. The village was to be wiped out. All of those tough Swedes and Italians, living on nothing and expecting nothing, were to be put out of their homes. Cheap rents were to be a thing of the past. You got in with the 'real thing'—the Diamond Maskers—a committee of questionable citizens of Beula, and straightway took a commanding place, which is your nature, for you have more than commonplace brains.

"Mr. Arthur Stetlow had been sent out here to negotiate the purchase of the property from its real owners. He was not liked, nor was his mission admired. If he could be put out of the way, Beula figured that it would have another lease of life. Beula did not care to have its own roof sold from under its own dear head to further the interests of any big land office. You became an immediate champion of the cause—you needed the money; eh, Mac?"

Droopy was not inclined to make any response. He simply sat, squeezed between two pillows, taking it all in, with a disparaging sort of expression on his fat, uncouth countenance.

Nick Carter continued, just the same:

"With nothing in sight that would bring you better revenues, you undertook a very difficult job, that of breaking a trust. Stetlow had been sent to close a deal at Beula. He was prepared to buy the entire county, almost. Beula took a final stand—and you had the helm. What was your first move? Why, a warning, of course. You wrote threatening letters to Stetlow, both to Chicago and after he reached New York. You told him that it would be wise for him to desist and to go back home. Like the real man he was, he ignored these bits of correspondence. He came right on to the club. The very night he landed he was troubled again. The easiest way to talk to him without fear of detection and arrest was a pebble thrown through his room window. This you did. I recognized your handwriting on the stone, for I found it under his bed, and I knew that copperplate writing you learned, my dear sir, at forging checks in Chicago. In one of your former letters, you had told Stetlow to meet you at the old house in the woods—the same locality where he afterward met his untimely death. He ignored the request, the warning, the demand. He was just that sort of a genuine fellow. Stetlow was no coward.

"The first pebble message simply struck glass; the second, after he had raised the window, fell into the room. I do not know that he even saw it, although I guess he did. All this time, Stetlow had in his room a certain green box. It contained valuable papers, as you knew. You understood their value and their real significance. They were holdings on the Beula property, and represented thousands of dollars if consummated. A deed, once signed, is as sure as death and taxes, Mac.

"It was your kindly intention to have Stetlow meet you and your committee at the old house. If he would consent to go back and abandon his plans he was not to be molested. The pebble message suggested that. You were prepared to negotiate with him on your own recommendations. He did not come. That same night, you, and I mean *you*, Mac, reached Stetlow's window by means of the stone ledge and entered his room. You were after the paper in the green box. That box Stetlow had not locked, as he had opened it the same night to drop in a post card. You slipped out the inner green box, which fitted the outer one perfectly, and took it with you. It contained the very documents you desired; but Stetlow surprised you. He snatched at your person as you were leaving the room by the open window. All he managed to get was a section of gold watch chain. Look at your own now. You have patched it up and are using the same chain, if slightly shortened. Stetlow was not a dull head. He knew that the outer green box had been pilfered, but he placed all he had within the shell remaining—including the fragments of the gold chain,

and I intended to match those up for your own especial benefit, to prove my statements."

Still Droopy remained impassive.

"I wish to continue this to its climax," Nick Carter resumed. "We have you now, and we might as well speak very plainly. Stetlow was not of the kind to raise a disturbance or to air his troubles. I have found that he was usually uncommunicative concerning business matters, and light of heart on top of it all. While he did send out to see who had tossed the pebble, after the first warning, he did not, later, give any suggestion of the midnight robbery to his club friends. He preferred to let it go, settling his own difficulties in his own way. After locking the cabinet drawer, he went for a game of golf. He became tired, which was natural in a man of his build and constitution.

"He stopped under a tree. You happened to be perching in that tree, Mr. Mac, and it was neatly arranged, to give you full credit. It had always been Mr. Stetlow's custom to play golf in the morning, if his friends could persuade him to do so, and you were acquainted with this fact. A splendid point of vantage would be the old tree by the Micklin Road, half around the links. Therefore, the branches for yours. Stetlow was half gone when he reached that point. He sank down to rest, the heat having overcome him. The Stetlow proposition had grown to be serious with you by this time. You could neither bend his will nor make him respond to your wishes. Then it must be a matter of force. In the thickets the big fellow was waiting—and I have reason to know that big fellow, for one of my assistants shot him dead, as he deserved, a few feet beyond the very dial where poor Stetlow was found murdered.

"How did I know some one had entered Stetlow's room? I think you would like to ask that, and I'll tell you. Mr. Droopy, you had to jump for it, when Stetlow heard you prowling around the room in the dark. You slid part of the way down to the grass and dropped the balance. I found the impression of two heels, where they had gone deep into the clay, the day I began to study up the case.

"Having secured the contents of the inner green box, you kept it about as long as you deemed safe. The blacksmith down the road is in league with the Diamond Masks, the Beula secret organization. A happy thought occurred to you. You would take it to the smith and have him melt it in the forge. There was no reason to leave a ghastly tell-tale clue like that hanging around where I or any one else might run across it at any minute. It is with deep regret, Mr. Droopy, that I look back upon my being compelled to interfere at all, and as for the timely appearance of my good friend Chickering, I think you know all about his little share in the deal."

Chick appreciated that Nick Carter was rehearsing the details of Droopy's career as much for his, Chick's, benefit, as to nail Droopy down, once and for all. Yet there was a dramatic element to that story, especially when it touched upon the actual murder of poor, good-natured Arthur Stetlow.

"Acting as an authorized agent of the Beula Order, you waited your turn, and it came. Typical of your methods it was to drop from the tree, behind Stetlow, and strike him insensible. By this time the players were beyond the last bunker and they could not see you. The big fellow helped you, after you had dragged Stetlow to the thickets. A part of the way he was made to walk, but he grew faint toward the last and you were compelled to carry him. The condition of his clothes suggested that you had a deal of trouble in this respect, especially when you crossed the little stream, just this side of the house, and Mr. Stetlow's golf cap fell into the backwater.

"Arguments, over in the garden, were unavailing. Stetlow, I have learned, could be as stern and as stubborn as he was, for the most part, smiling and good-humored. There is only one man with a rage—a temper like yours, Mac. I ought to know that, and the blows leveled at Stetlow, those horrible gashes with the dial hand, were executed in the white heat of passion. You killed your man in the argument, removing everything of value about the body. One thing Stetlow did do; and I give him credit for his bravery in the face of ugly odds; he snatched somebody's revolver in that mêlée and let fire at the big fellow. He caught him on the heel, inflicting a nasty little wound. In the cellar of the old house I found one of his shoes, his sock, and Stetlow's watch. The timepiece had been battered and scarred up rather well, one case having been taken away only. That there were numbers pasted in that case or graven upon it, or some secret business code, I can well imagine. You wanted it, Mac, but you didn't care about the watch. The big fellow crawled through the side window and entered the house. That was a wise little trick, for it left no marks on the dusty floors out front. He cut off the shoe from the bleeding foot, also the sock, and lost his balance while hobbling to one of the bins, for upon the rocks I found imprinted that one big red silhouette—the foot of a large man. When I examined the body my friend nipped beyond the sundial in

the moonlight, I discovered that his foot was still bandaged inside an extra large shoe. You see, Droopy, we have things in line, haven't we?"

The man leered back, grimacing and twitching his eyes, but he made no comments.

"You mentioned something about 'proof' a while back, Mac," the detective resumed. "I have some, a few little things that a jury might possibly be interested in. The three links of chain snatched by Stetlow from your own waist, and the pebble. Your handwriting is as good as it ever was. It has always been your undoing, and it will close your little game now, if I am not much mistaken."

"You can't take me; you've got no legal right," Droopy snarled from the crumpled pillows.

"Watch me get the papers," Carter retorted; "on that old bond theft count I could take you with me back to New York, but I don't care to revive it in the public mind and eye unless you force me. Back you go to the big town, Mac, so you might as well make up your mind to that."

A knock sounded on the door at this juncture; a quick, nervous series of raps.

"Open the door, Chick," Carter said.

Young Hilton Kemp almost ran in.

"Mr. Mede," he panted, "I have news for you and"—his gaze wandered inquiringly in Chick's direction; then, with keen astonishment to the bolstered-up Droopy on the bed—"and it's very important that you should know immediately."

"Go right ahead. This is a personal friend of mine, and the other gentleman doesn't count," Nick answered.

"Miss Stanwood has been abducted."

"What!"

"Yes, she has, and by that rascal she was going around with. I'm in possession of some of the facts, not all of them. They took your machine."

"The devil they did."

"And the chauffeur went along."

"Is Danny around anywhere?"

"He can't be found."

"How did you know that she had been abducted?"

"The man returned—he floated back to town with a cock-and-bull story of being stopped on the road to Beula and of being set upon by roughs in masks. It was a pretty story, but it ended up with his getting away. I'm dead certain that he knows too much about it. Mr. Stanwood is almost crazy and her mother is quite ill from shock. I didn't know but what you wanted to help the poor girl."

"The rascals," Nick Carter cried. "Droopy, I'll bet you know of this, too. Where is the girl?"

"Can't say; don't know."

"Would a revolver revive your memory?"

"Oh, forget it. I'm no baby."

"Kemp," Carter declared, "you've been a fine friend and a great help to me so far. Take it a bit further. Get several of the club members to come up here and watch this fellow. He mustn't get away. Varney says he has the murderer of Stetlow, but I don't believe it. There's our man, and Varney, if he has any one, scooped up a petty accomplice. We will get in the machine, all three of us, and run to Beula over the pike from Cessville; it is better at night than the other road."

Chick could handle the machine, but Kemp insisted upon driving, for he had a car of his own in town and it was of the same make. They shot away from the club grounds at terrific speed.

"Where to?" Kemp asked.

Nick Carter was absorbed in thought.

"There is a blacksmith shop just down from——"

"I know, I know. It's the only shop in Beula, or within fifteen miles, three ways. Do you want to go there?"

"That will be our first stop."

Nick was working on chance only, but he was not to go amiss, as the reader can naturally suppose.

The motor sang and the wheels clicked across the pebbled crossings, until, far ahead, squatting behind its battlement of rock fence, they saw the well-known shop, one star of light glimmering to the rear.

"We'd better go up slowly," Carter suggested; "stop the car here, Kemp. I hope they haven't heard it. There might be a dozen of the wretches in there, for all we know. If I can find one of them, however, I'll sweat the truth out of his hide or kill him."

"That's my sentiment exactly," Kemp gulped.

"Are you all armed?" Nick continued.

"Yes."

"Now down the road and into the field; we'll come up to the house."

With great precaution they reached the little low door of the shanty in the back. It was from the red-curtained window that the light glimmered, and it was only a dim one, as if from a lantern.

Nick Carter, with his revolvers drawn, deliberately tapped upon the wood with the snout of one saucy little weapon.

There was scurrying inside.

Almost as he stepped backward, fearful of an am-

bush, a shot blazed away, and the glass in the small window fell clinking to the ground. This was followed by a second and a third and a fourth shot, until the air sang with bullets, some coming through the door, now slightly cracked. The light went out in a twinkling and the red square to their right was no more.

"Looks like business to me," Chick muttered, trying to find out where to shoot.

As he spoke the shanty door flew wide open, and a man staggered out, bearing a woman's limp form in his arms. Chick Carter raised his revolver and pulled the trigger. He had aimed at the lower extremities of the man, and he was a dead shot.

Nick, however, with lightning-like dexterity, pushed up and aside the arm.

"Stop," he exclaimed huskily; "can't you see it's Danny?"

CHAPTER XII.

DETECTIVE VARNEY'S "MURDERER."

The shots were still sounding from the back shanty with spiteful persistency, and aggravating tongues of flame gushed into the darkness from at least six rifles. It was a hotbed of peril and poor marksmanship.

Nick Carter ran across to Danny, who had stumbled to the ground, in the stubble, dropping his fair burden from his arms.

He lifted the girl in his own powerful arms.

"Streak it," Danny gasped; "no use to stand against them. There are twelve or more, and all heavily armed. They can nip us off from the shanty."

"We might make a stand," Carter returned.

"Foolish to try it, sir."

"Then we'll run for the machine. How many did you say there were?"

"Twelve, at the least; a mighty bad crowd."

The word was passed along the line, and all started for the low stone wall, Chick helping Carter lift Miss Stanwood to comparative safety on the other side, the rifle balls spitting against the stones in lively fashion.

Kemp and Danny were not far behind, and the machine under the trees up the road was reached only a few minutes after a stream of men poured over the wall on the left side of the shop and began to fire.

"If they get a tire we're goners," Danny cried. He was in the seat, with a hand on the wheel.

"Let her go, Danny," Chick bubbled enthusiastically.

"And be quick about it," Kemp chimed in nervously.

Again a fusillade sounded from the shadows. But by this time they were on an easy stretch of open road, and the touring car buzzed in the direction of Cessville at a rate of speed that made the roadside landscape look like a flash in the gloom. Danny was talking volubly all the while, and Nick Carter questioning him with equal freedom.

Miss Stanwood, still unconscious, was in the rear seat, along with Chick and Kemp, and they were doing their utmost to revive her.

"So you were mixed up in this, eh?" Nick asked.

"I certainly was."

"I heard that Tom Brevert hired the machine?"

"Yes, he did. I accepted his offer, thinking that he might be up to something. I didn't imagine it would be so serious."

"They abducted the girl?"

"Oh, no; it started out like an innocent ride, but Tom threw the game. I could see through it when he made a skipping run for the woods, on his way back to the club colony."

"He's telling the story there that he just escaped with his life. But he intended to share in the proceeds, all right, later on. I guess that Tom's supply of flashy cash is about exhausted, and he was willing to do almost anything to retrieve it. Blood money was better than nothing, and he worked on the girl's liking for him."

"Precisely my opinion, Mr. Carter."

"How did you manage to get out?"

"Oh, from the shanty, you mean? Easy. They didn't take me so seriously and, on my promise to be a 'good boy,' they took off my ropes. They had the girl almost hysterical, trying to make her write a letter to her father, asking for a big bunch as ransom. She was about to sign it when you folks arrived."

"Then they spotted us and began to fire?"

"Sure thing."

"And you——"

"I ran to the girl in the dark, the lantern having been blown out, and as they opened the door to fire through it at you, I took her in my arms and made a dash for the open. It was my only chance; there were so beastly many of them."

"Meeting place in there?"

"Looks like it to me. I guess it was this same Beula gang that made an attack upon you that night at the old house in the woods. They were coming back to get Stetlow's body, and a detective on the

grounds was not the best thing for their precious hides. I could never understand why they left Stetlow out there on the sundial."

"Simple enough," said Nick. "Their love for the spectacular. He had been murdered within a few feet of it, and as a warning to others who might disturb the stolid sleep of Beula and her private interests they threw Stetlow across the dial, where the body was almost certain to be found. When it became noised around that a couple of detectives were on the ground, the proposition did not look so pleasant. They resolved to do away with the body, in case of chance or accidental clues."

"Yes, that sounds reasonable."

Nick Carter looked backward over the big leather seat.

"How is she, Chick?" he asked.

"Reviving."

"That's good. Poor girl, she has been under a dreadful strain for these past hours."

"Where shall we run? Right up to the house with her?"

"Yes. I hear that her father is frantic, and her mother ill from shock. We can't get her home too soon."

There was real rejoicing when the car rolled up in front of the Stanwood home; and that gentleman attempted to reward Nick Carter in a most substantial manner for his part in the affair. He refused, of course.

"Mr. Stanwood," he said, smiling. "This is my vacation. I could accept no fees. Couldn't think of it, sir. Besides, I have played a most unimportant part in the transaction. Young Kemp is a solid little hero all in his own right. His quick action and personal bravery made it possible for us to accomplish what we did, and"—here Nick hesitated for a second—"and, to speak very frankly, if you could get that young fellow into the family it would be a mighty fine thing. He thinks the world of your daughter, and he would make her the finest husband in the State. I wish he belonged to me."

But Mr. Stanwood was not surprised.

He smiled in turn and nodded good-naturedly.

"The young folks think well of each other, as it is. Had some little fuss, I guess. It'll blow over."

While the others waited in the car at the curb, Nick went a step further. His admiration for young Kemp was genuine, and he could not leave the house without adjusting that lovers' quarrel. The fact that Tom Brevert had slipped, like an eel, into the social swim of the colony was only natural, for he had that faculty to a dot.

Miss Stanwood, who had fully recovered, walked with him to the door.

"We're all very grateful, Mr. Mede," she said, lowering her eyes; "you know that."

"I only know this," the detective responded, "that Hilton Kemp has been wronged. I saw you cut him dead the other day at the club. It was cruel and unwarranted. Kemp is a perfectly bully fellow. He saved you, really; not the rest of us."

"Mr. Kemp and I do not speak," she returned.

"Then it's high time you did. I'll be here for a few days, perhaps, and I intend to make it my business to see that this quarrel is patched up immediately. You saw what Tom Brevert was—a coward all the way through. These clever tongues hide much that is malice and mean and small. I want you to promise me something; that will be *my* reward. Make it up with Hilton to-morrow morning. I intend to send him around for a little praise of his own. He wouldn't come into the house to-night, for he thought it would embarrass you."

The pretty girl did not hesitate.

She reached out for the detective's hand and squeezed it heartily.

"I'll promise," she whispered, and the door closed.

* * * * * * *

Danny, Chick, Kemp and Nick Carter were just rumbling up to the clubhouse, after their night of peril and strange adventure, when, as they stepped from the car, into the light from the brilliantly illluminated veranda, they were met by no less a personage than the Chicago detective, Mr. Varney. He had some friends with him and was his usual sly, smirking self.

"Which of you gentlemen is Mr. Mede?" he asked.

"I am Mr. Mede," Nick answered.

"Then I want to speak with you. My prisoner, whom we suspect of the murder of Mr. Stetlow, desires to talk with you."

Nick Carter was perplexed.

"Wants to speak with *me?*" he exclaimed.

"Yes, at the Cessville jail."

"What does he look like?"

Nick Carter and the others followed every word of that description with gradually increasing amazement and interest. Chick alone was undisturbed.

"Why, you've got Patsy, one of my men," Nick exclaimed.

"I guess he has," Chick put in.

"I found him under suspicious circumstances out there near the scene of the murder," Varney snapped, on his sudden dignity.

"If you will allow me, I think I can clear that up, Mr. Varney," Chickering Carter continued. "Patsy and myself were telegraphed for. We ran down from New York as speedily as we could. We have been out through those woods ever since the murder, investigating and helping—Mr. Mede. He did not know of this; in fact, he was kept in absolute ignorance of our presence. You caught Patsy burying an old shirt, blood-stained, in the woods. It was his own shirt. We had a run in with those scoundrels one night and Patsy was slightly wounded. He didn't want to go around with a bloody shirt on and he buried it, that's all. I guess you have the wrong man this time."

"I know he has," Nick Carter added triumphantly; "the murderer of Mr. Stetlow is now under guard in my room, upstairs. We have enough proof against him to convict a dozen men. He will confess before the night is over. Mr. Varney, my regrets."

With that the detective whirled about and ran up the steps. Kemp and Chick followed, and some of the club members, while Danny was left to go with Varney in the machine to Cessville and rescue the luckless Patsy.

Around a convivial table, Nick and the others joined. It was after midnight, yet no one was sleepy.

"Gentlemen," Nick said, standing erect, "to those of you who wish a toast, I propose the health of one of your best members, a loyal friend, one of the bravest little fellows I have ever met. I am honored to know him, although our acquaintance has been of short duration. The fact that I was 'Nicholas Carter,' not Mr. Mede, has been closely guarded. I did not wish my identity known. I came up here to rest, and didn't want to be bothered. My assistant, Chick, has told me much. He tells me that Mr. Kemp recognized me as soon as I landed, but did not make it known. He kept my secret. As I played the amateur, being much interested, he decided to help all he could. He did, you may rest assured. The woods were filled with 'bad people,' he saw that I was in deadly peril here, and, on his own account, he wired for Chick and Patsy. He warned them, made them promise not to tell that they were on deck until he gave the word. I guess the two enjoyed the lark at that; it was so different. I wish to acknowledge that they stood by me in a dozen hours of need. I've got some mighty fine young fellows in my little New York establishment."

The glasses clinked and there were unanimous congratulations. That he had been thrown into the limelight was not at all Kemp's own doing.

The only thing to mar the occasion was a note handed to Nick, in the midst of the jolly talk. It was in a sealed envelope, and was signed: "Tom Brevert."

Its text was:

"Guess I'll get out. Have some trouble landing me, don't you, Carter?"

"But I'll land him yet," Carter gritted, as he tossed the note across to Chick.

Final arrangements were completed, before dawn, whereby Nick was to take Droopy Mac straight to New York, to answer for his many crimes, and that he was weakening made his conviction a certainty.

"There's one thing you didn't find out, and I can tell you," Kemp said to the detective. They were the last to leave the table and had strolled out upon the porch in the quiet night.

"What is that, Kemp?"

"You know you were telling about the mysterious post card on leather, addressed to Jack. Do you know who Jack is, and why your Chicago telegrams were of no avail?"

"I guess I don't."

"'Jack' is a nickname we have for Miss Stanwood. She knew Mr. Stetlow well, for she lives through the winter in the Windy City. That clears up the last puzzle. Mr. Stetlow had spoken to 'Jack' of being warned not to meddle in the Beula land deal and she had written to him and spoken of the incident. It frightened her."

"We'll not talk another minute about that case," Nick finished, with a sigh; "I'm all tired out to-night, my friend Kemp, I honestly am; these vacations are so trying. By the way, I have made an engagement for you to-morrow morning. You're expected around at the Stanwood residence—without fail."

Kemp said nothing, but his hand closed over the detective's in a tight, warm grip which meant a thousand times more than mere words. It was the handclasp of a good friend.

THE END.

The next number (653) will contain "The Taxicab Mystery; or, Nick Carter Closes a Deal."

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How Hotel Thieves are Watched.

How is the vast army of hotel thieves kept from preying on the still vaster army of the traveling public these days?

If you stepped into the lobby of the Auditorium Annex, in Chicago, during, say, the Republican National Convention, you possibly thought what a grand chance there was for the light-fingered gentry, familiar with the interior workings of such a big institution, to make away with property carelessly left around, to enter rooms, thoughtlessly left open, and in a hundred different ways to make a rich haul from the thousands who made the place their headquarters.

Doubtless there were depredations committed, probably there were minor thefts, but it is safe to say that the well-known detective system employed in big hotels, not only here but all over the country, kept the majority of the big thieves from the city. There are many interesting episodes that occur in hotels, countless incidents that come up in the course of their administration, which are handled quietly and informally by the house detective. It is seldom that any of these leak out, but once in a while they do and the public gets a glimpse of the system which is employed to protect the careless public.

Down at the Annex it is Frank Repetto who has charge of the protection of the people who stop there, and there are eighteen others who report to him every day. Mr. Repetto is besides a detective of well-known authority on criminal law in Chicago. It is said that few criminal lawyers possess any more accurate information of course of procedure or the rights of a defendant than he does. The other day he was sitting in his back office, and the table in front of him was littered with pictures, each one with a neat array of red numbers across the back. Mr. Repetto is a dark-complexioned, delicately-featured man and looks more like an artist than a sleuth.

"Speaking about this class of men," he said, "the class of crooks who operate in big hotels are the keenest men in the world. They are the class who sometimes marry heiresses and the class who pass checks on national banks. They are the class of men who pose as foreign noblemen sometimes, and sometimes carry through good business deals into which they have plunged without backing. Then again they are like 'Mr. Dove,' who called a chauffeur, rode with him and murdered him—no one knows why.

"They are the smartest of all the criminals in this country, these fellows who operate in the big hotels, from the man who works the doors to the man who works the proprietor. No, they are not even equalled by the extraordinary women who work the hotels. The men seem to be the smartest and the wickedest.

"But they have been curbed in the last fifteen years. The big deals have grown less and less, until the overcoat pilferer has become more to be guarded against than the diamond thief. Still there are many big ones left. You see this fine fellow?"

Here Mr. Repetto reached forward and drew a photograph from among those on the table.

"Pretty gentlemanly-looking specimen," continued the house detective as he rubbed his thumb across the picture and laid it carefully one side, "but he is the worst blackguard in the hotel crook game. Oh, he is a high flyer, all right, and we had one little tilt that he won't forget in a hurry; but to tell you about it I will have to go back a bit.

"You see, I am here to protect the hotel patrons by every means in my power, and to do that I have adopted the motto of never inviting trouble. This is the reason that I warn crooks to keep away from the places under my charge. When I learn of a hotel thief coming into town I manage by some way or another to give him the tip to keep his distance. If he does this all is well and good as far as I am concerned; if not, then there is trouble.

"Now to return to our fine-looking friend. One bright day he arrived in Chicago magnificently clad and on the warpath. Of course I learned that he was here, and sent the usual tip for him to keep away from the hotel. He gave his word that he would. I trusted enough in thieves' honor' to believe him.

"A couple of days later I was walking through the corridor of the hotel when one of the patrons hailed me. He apologized for mentioning what he said was a slight incident, but remarked that he believed I should know about it. It seems from what he said that during the morning a man had entered his wife's room, which adjoined his, and was passing through when the guest confronted him.

"The visitor made profuse apologies for what he termed his mistake in apartments and withdrew at once. I asked the patron to describe the man, which he did after much hesitation, vowing that such an aristocratic-looking gentleman could not be a thief. His description, however, exactly fitted that of our distinguished-looking friend of the photograph. When I showed the man the picture he immediately identified the man.

"I think it was half—it might have been three-quarters—an hour before I arrested my man. He, of course, denied that he had been in the hotel, but I knew differently.

"When he was arraigned in court I was there with a couple of my men. The judge decided that there was not enough evidence to hold him. He was discharged and while the judge and I were arguing the affair he slipped out of the court room. At the same time I signaled one of my men to shadow him.

"The man later reported that our fine-looking friend had taken the train for Buffalo. Immediately I wired that city, where I suspected that there was an old charge hanging over him, that he was eastward bound. He was picked up there and given a short sentence. After his release I located him in Pittsburg and gave him the same dose.

"In this manner I made that man's life a burden all over the country. The last place I managed to land on him was in Salt Lake City, where I heard that he was visiting during a fraternal conclave.

"Shortly after that some of the man's friends came to me and accused me of persecuting him. I acknowledged that I was following him pretty closely, but explained to them that it was only a just punishment for his breaking faith. They pleaded another chance for him, and, as I really thought that he had had a lesson, I called off. And it was a lesson, not only to him, but to many other crooks who heard of the case."

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